



♪ 杉井 光

さよならピアノソナタ

イラスト ♪ 植田 亮

encore pieces

Since then, time has moved forward.
All of us have matured a little.
But despite the fact that we are all flying in different directions in
order to fully stretch our wings,
we are still soaring beneath the same sky.
That is easily understood after carefully listening to each of our
singing voices.



"sonate pour deux"—11

蜷沢 真冬
Mafuyu
Ebisawa

梶川 直巳
Naomi
Hikawa





相原
Chiaki
Aihara
千晶



ユウリ
Julien
Flaubert

ステレオフォニックの恋 169

神楽坂
Kyouko
Kagurazaka
響子





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Illustration: Ryo Ueda
Designed by Toru Suzuki

"Sonate pour deux"

When I first set my eyes on the first page of the score, the song reminded me of a fluttering moth.

The countermelody circled around the burning main melody before diving into the flames. But despite being burnt into nothingness, new moths would spawn from the charred ashes—that was the feeling that that song had imparted on me.

Sonata in A \flat major, also known as "opus postumus," was a posthumous work. And because there was no given title for that sonata, I habitually referred to it as <Fire-thieving Moths>.



After I had become a ruffian in the classical music industry, I had found that there were a few particular questions that I would commonly be asked, such as "Why don't classical pieces have titles? Wouldn't not having titles make it difficult to refer to them?" I had briefly touched on that topic during an interview for a magazine—it was an interview for an album, though I had only produced one of the album's songs.

"Mr. Nao, are you the one that came up with the album's name, <Mutant Butterfly>?"

"Yeah, it was me. Back then, no one could come up with a name for the album, so the manager said, 'Hey Nao, name one of your favourite songs!' To which I replied, 'Beethoven's Sonata no.31 in A \flat major.' But they misheard it as "mutant butterfly" instead....." [TL Note: Apparently, "A \flat major" sounds similar to "mutant butterfly" in Japanese]

The interviewer roared with laughter. Then, he posed that question —

"Still, why are classical pieces referred to as whatever number and whatever pitch instead of titles that are easier to understand?"

I had been asked that question several times already, so I already

had an answer prepared.

"Well..... here's an analogous situation. Military buffs usually refer to fighter jets by their model numbers, don't they? They'll call a jet an 'F-14' as opposed to a 'Tomcat,' and they rarely ever refer to the 'SR-71' as 'Blackbird.' Fans of classical music are the same. Referring to these classical songs by their opus number makes us sound cooler and more knowledgeable, doesn't it?"

"I see!"

Of course that was just me bullshitting.



I had first come into contact with <Fire-thieving Moths> on my twenty-fourth birthday.

The day before that—the last day I was twenty-three—happened to be the same day Mafuyu was finished her American tour and was returning to Japan. So having just completed my work, I drove down to Narita Airport early in the morning.

I wasn't sure if it was because of the spring holidays, but the airport was filled with tourists when I arrived there at ten, and many of them were travelling as a family. Because of that, the airport was somewhat packed, but I still spotted Mafuyu's shiny maroon hair instantly as she made her way through the arrival gate. Mafuyu saw me before I could even wave my hands and immediately ran towards me.

The last time we had seen each other was during New Years. Three months had already passed, and it felt like she had become even prettier.

Ebisawa Mafuyu—she was now the world famous pianist with "mercury fingers." So who had come up with that weird title of hers? It's sad to say this, but it was my dad, Hikawa Tetsurou. And because that title suited Mafuyu's style of playing the piano, her "ice beauty" look, and her staunch rejection of the media, it was quickly accepted by everyone, and had even made its way overseas.

Even though we were already adults, to me, Mafuyu was still an ordinary girl that cried easily and that got angry for the slightest

reasons. And she would only prove my point as she walked towards me with wobbly steps. It has been three months—I think it should be okay to give her a really tight hug, right? But that tiny thought of mine was immediately quashed by my rationality when I thought about how it would look in the eyes of the crowd around us.

"Welcome back—"

Right when I finished saying that, Mafuyu came to a stop two meters in front of me. For some reason, she was warily scanning the arrival hall behind me.

"I-Is something wrong?" Did she read my mind and become aware of my desire to hug her?

"We will not be chased around by anyone, right? And we will not be brought to a strange place again, right?"

"Nah! Why would that happen?"

"Those are my only impressions of Narita Airport....."

As Mafuyu mumbled those words with her head lowered, I remembered what had happened there.

Mafuyu was always flying all over the place because of her tours, but that was already our third time meeting at Narita Airport. The first time was during the summer of our first year of high school, while the second time was during the winter. In both cases, we were chased around by the security; and both times, there was hardly any chance for us to talk. Ah, those were painful days.....

Regarding the third time—today—Mafuyu had actually asked me to pick her up at the airport. That was the first time she had done that, and it also meant that Ebichiri wouldn't be around. That was why I had spent the whole night finishing all my work, so that I could reach the airport early in the morning.

"Urm..... we sure did some impulsive things when we were young....."—I laughed wryly—"But you don't have to worry today. I'm here specifically to pick you up!"

Mafuyu nodded her head vigorously and walked right up to me.

"..... I am back."

Mafuyu's tiny voice was almost drowned out by the sound of rolling

luggage. What's wrong? She didn't look very happy.

But she didn't seem angry either. I guess she's just exhausted from all that travelling? I mean, she did fly halfway across the globe; and there's the jet lag to consider as well. She should be sleeping at around this time.

I grabbed Mafuyu's luggage and started walking.

"Where are we going?"

"I drove here, so how about we send you home? You're probably dead tired, right? You don't look very good."

"Send me home?"

Mafuyu shot past me and turned around. Looks like I've really pissed her off this time.

"I specifically planned my return flight to arrive around this time, so why would I want to go back home?"

"S-Sorry, is there someplace you'd like to go?"

Mafuyu shook her head hard.

"Urm..... then? What's going on here?"

"It just means anywhere is fine as long as I can be together with Naomi!"

I must've had an incredibly silly expression on my face after hearing that. Mafuyu's face was all red, and her eyebrows were arching upwards.

"I-I see..... Mmm, I get it. I'm sorry."

I cautiously closed the distance between us and gently took her hand. She responded with a firm grip.

The announcements were blaring nonstop over the speakers, and as we stepped onto the escalator, I asked that question softly.

"Then..... how about my home?"

Mafuyu nodded. Looking at her from the side, it seemed like she couldn't wait.

We were overwhelmed by fatigue when we reached my house, so after a quick shower, we dropped dead onto my bed.



We each took another shower after waking up. It was already ten at night when I began preparing our dinner; and Mafuyu had just walked out of the bathroom with a tired expression on her face and her wet hair wrapped up in a towel. Though our jobs aren't exactly what you would call normal, it's still a little much for us to sleep from morning to late into the night. I guess we should reflect on that a little.

As I was preparing the fish in the kitchen, Mafuyu sat herself down on my bed and looked around the room. For some strange reason, she looked disappointed.

"..... Sorry, my room's really cramped....."

Mafuyu had visited my room several times already, but I still deliberately said that anyway. But she just shook her head.

"That is not what I was thinking. Naomi's room is just way too clean. There is nothing I can help out with."

"Really? I think it's a little messy in some areas."

One of the walls of the room was covered with rows of guitars and basses, and a two-tier electric piano and synthesizer were also present. The instruments took up almost the entire space. Additionally, I had recently converted my music into a digital format, so I didn't have very many CDs left; but I still couldn't convert my books, so my shelves were still filled to the brim.

"Naomi, why are you so neat and tidy even though you are his child?"

Mafuyu knew very well how destructively lazy Tetsurou was, but there was still this complicated feeling inside me when I heard that question of hers. Can you not word it that way?

"Well, a child does grow up looking at the backs of his parents; but there are certainly occasions where a parent serves as a negative example rather than a positive one."

"At the very least, allow me to help out with our laundry!" Mafuyu stood up.

"But I already washed everything while you were in the shower."

"Why did you wash them?" Why are you so angry anyway?

Mafuyu puffed her cheeks out and sat herself back down on the bed.

When dinnertime rolled around, Mafuyu was still a little unhappy. She ate her food silently, but did occasionally peek at my face.

"Urm..... sorry, are the dishes bad?"

"I have tasted plenty of dishes in various hotels and restaurants in America, but Naomi's miso soup is still the best out there."

Then you should look happier when you're eating my food.....

"I wish I could eat your dishes every day....."

"Nah, that's impossible. I can't possibly freight them to America every single day!"

"From the next month onwards, I will be shifting the focus of my work back to Japan. It is too tiring doing tours all the time."

Mafuyu's announcement caught me by surprise, and I nearly dropped my bowl onto the floor.

"Eh? Back to Japan..... So that means..... you'll be living here?"

"..... Is that no good?"

"What are you talking about!? Of course that's great! I'm really happy!" I leaned my body forward in excitement. Up till then, the longest Mafuyu had ever stayed in Japan was a month; and even then, we couldn't see each other every day.

"..... And so..... therefore..... I can eat your food..... every day."

Said Mafuyu, as she looked at me shyly.

"But still..... it won't be easy for you to make time for that every day, right? Your house is a considerable distance away from mine too....."

I was suddenly kicked in the leg beneath the table. Huh? W-What's going on? Does she really want me to send my cooking to her house every day?

"Whatever! You are an idiot. Pretend I never said that."

After saying that, Mafuyu sent a spoonful of sashimi salad into her

mouth.

When we were done eating dinner, Mafuyu said she wanted to do the dishes, but I stopped her immediately.

"Why not?" pouted Mafuyu. "Are you going to say something like 'a pianist shouldn't be risking her fingers doing chores like this' as well?"

"Of course!"

"I hate this. You have done all the housework impeccably, so there is nothing left for me to do!"

"But I don't even mind that you're not doing any of the housework."

"But I do!" Don't slam the table! What on earth do you want?

Mafuyu hugged her knees on my bed and turned to face the wall. Seems like she's really pissed off. So while I was washing the plates, I cautiously asked her,

"Right, I..... I bought a new electric piano. Wanna give it a go?"

Mafuyu had wrapped herself up with a blanket and was still throwing a tantrum on my bed, but she eventually got off and sat down in front of the piano. She flicked the switch on. And as Mafuyu rested her "mercury fingers" on the keyboard, I unconsciously set the dish I was washing down and turned off the faucet.

One of Mafuyu's unrivaled characteristics was the delicate way she struck the keys, which was often referred to as "the faintest sound, like the fog of the night." It was a shame that the electric piano was unable to interpret her gentle playing to replicate the sounds accordingly, but what should've been a sickeningly sweet E-major melody was still transformed into something that felt like a cup of smoothie, that was incredibly comforting to listen to.

It was Edward Elgar's <Salut d'Amour>, a heart-warming piano piece that was dedicated to Caroline Alice, the woman that would later become his wife. Because the song was less than three minutes long, I stopped washing the dishes to listen to it until it was over.

"..... That's the first time I've heard you play that song! Do you like Elgar?"

"Nope." Mafuyu shook her head while facing the keyboard. "I dislike all his works aside from his Cello Concerto."

Now that's being really clear about what she likes and dislikes! But why play that song then?

"It is fine if you do not understand..... Is there any song you would like to listen to?"

"Eh? Well....."

I wasn't sure if she was still angry, so I hastily washed the dishes with unease and walked to Mafuyu's side.

"There's a ton of stuff that I'd love to listen to you play..... Can I really choose? But it's so late already....."

"I will be staying here tonight."

"Huh?" The lingering sounds of <Salut d'Amour> were completely erased by that strange cry of mine. "Ah, urm..... well..... urm, what I meant was..... you're definitely welcome to stay, but is that really okay? Your dad, he should be back in Japan, no? And since you'll be staying in Japan for the long term anyway, there's no hurry to have you stay over tonight....."

"Papa is still in America..... though he should already be on his flight from Dallas."

"What's..... going on?"

"It is just..... If I had returned to Japan together with Papa, I would not have been able to leisurely spend time together with you. So I snuck away and returned a day earlier."

..... And I wanted to see you while you were still the same age as I am—upon hearing that explanation from Mafuyu, I sat down next to her on the small piano chair and leaned in closely to her body. I had my back facing her because I was really quite embarrassed. I see, so that's why she only had a small piece of luggage with her when she came back.

"It seems like Papa wants to discuss something with you once he is back in Japan. But because it is rare for me to be able to meet you on your birthday, I really did not want to see you together with Papa."

"Ebichiri wants to discuss something with me?"

What could it be? Probably something related to Mafuyu, I guess? Whenever Ebichiri was looking for me, his image as a "world-renowned conductor" disappeared and was replaced by that of a silly father that doted on his daughter too much. If I was given the option, I would very much prefer that he be looking for me to talk about things like speakers or stage performances and so on.

Though I was oblivious to it, the hands of the clock on the wall had just overlapped with one another while pointing upwards. The fourth of April had finally arrived.

"Happy birthday, Naomi!"

"Mmm, thanks."

"I have specially prepared a birthday present for you. I bought these in Manchester when the BBC Philharmonic invited me to go to England."

The patchwork bag she gave me was filled with EP records and cassette tapes. They were said to contain the live recordings of Manchester-born performers before they had become famous worldwide. And included, were the Oasis, The Stone Roses, etc. I had never expected her to find something like this.

"You do not quite like Manchester music, do you?"

"Mmm..... You do know me well."

"Manchester music," as it was called, was comprised of bands categorized under the britpop genre. And for reasons unknown to myself, britpop music just wasn't quite my cup of tea.

"You may start to like it after listening to these recordings. Or perhaps you might dislike it even more."

"What about you?"

When I turned my head around, Mafuyu was only a hair's breadth away from me. She pouted as she thought of an answer.

"I cannot really say if I like it or not, but..... it does make me want to share it with you, Naomi."

"..... I love presents like that."

And that was the truth. Music existed to mesmerize the hearts of others to transport them to an unknown place. And as to whether that place would be an oasis or a wasteland filled with thorns and rubble..... we could only decide that after we had reached that destination.

"That is not all..... I am giving you. I will also play whatever songs you want."

Feels just like the Christmas of a certain year. Mafuyu and I were reminded of the same thing at the same time; and our faces came into contact with each other as we smiled.

"But since it's so late already....." I snuck a peek at the clock. It'd be boring if I could only listen to gentle melodies that were along the lines of <Salut d'Amour>; I want her to go all out if she's going to play.

So I hooked the electric piano to the mixer and plugged in two pairs of earphones. The wires and the warm electric signals linked Mafuyu and me together.

"So what will your first request be?"

Murmured Mafuyu.

"I haven't thought of anything yet. But we still have time anyway....."

I made my way to my bed, which was a slight distance away from the piano, and went deep in thought.

"Are you okay with a slightly longer piece?"

"If you want me to play Wagner's <Der Ring des Nibelungen> rearranged for the piano in its entirety, I will do just that."

Don't! Do you have any idea how long that'll take?

"Because that means I will be able to be together with Naomi!"

I was secretly glad that Mafuyu was still facing the piano when she said that, as I was so incredibly happy at that moment, the expression on my face was probably pretty disgusting.

"Urm..... well..... How about Beethoven's <Op. 106> then?"

Her maroon hair bobbed for a brief moment. Then, she raised her

slender fingers and placed them on the keyboard. The first movement, reminiscent of majestic fanfare, began to play through the earphones.



Beethoven's —

During the time Beethoven was still alive, improvements to the

piano were advancing at a rapid pace. The range of the piano's sound became wider, and its timbre approached that of the piano in its final pristine form. Whenever the artisans crafted a new piano, Beethoven would come up with sonatas that would push the piano to its limits. And when Sonata No. 29 was created, Beethoven had finally composed a piece that had exceeded the instrument's capabilities, as well as the musical skills, of his time.

In an unexpected twist that even Beethoven could not have predicted, the piece that was written for future pianists, and for the piano of the future, was named <Hammerklavier>, the German word for the fortepiano.

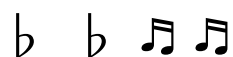
I liked that term quite well, as it explicitly stated that the instrument was made up of hammers and a keyboard. [TL Note: Hammerklavier literally means "hammer-keyboard"]

But that piece was demanding not only of the instrument itself, but also of the pianist, who had to reveal everything about himself. The pianist had to remain focused for the entirety of the fifty-minute performance, something that was incredibly difficult to achieve for even seasoned pianists.

But Mafuyu was playing <Hammerklavier> right before my eyes. She was playing a song that would've been impossible for her to play had her fingers not fully recovered.

I closed my eyes and listened to the adagio of the third movement coming from the earphones. It felt like I was peering into the depths of a spring.

This time spent together with Mafuyu..... there'll be plenty more times like this to come.



I received his call the following day. I was using my thumb to try to rub away the drowsiness on my eyelids when I picked up the vibrating cellphone next to my pillow. Whose number is this?

"Hello? This is Ebisawa speaking."

Out came the slightly unhappy voice of the man on the other side of the phone. Still in a daze, I almost asked "Which Ebisawa am I

speaking to?"

"—Hmm? Ah! You're..... Mr. Ebisawa Chisato?"

I'm not sure if she was awakened by my yelp, but Mafuyu, who was sleeping next to me, gave a "Hmm?" and flipped her body around. The tip of her nose was pressing tightly into my arm.

"Yes. It has been a while."

"Oh, no, it's okay," I slid out of the blanket and reflexively sat seiza on the bed.

"I have just returned to Japan and am currently in Tokyo. Mafuyu should have arrived a day earlier than me, but I could not reach her through her phone..... Mmm, so I am wondering if you know where she is. Just in case. Sorry for interrupting you at a time like this, but I just want to make sure."

There were faint hints of a thorny "I have an idea of what's going on, but I don't want to face it anyway" emotion hidden in his words, so I was at a loss at what to say. But at that moment, Mafuyu just happened to open her eyes slightly, and as she hugged me tightly while still half-asleep, she cooed, with a slightly nasal voice, "Naomi? What is going on? What time is it now?" It seemed like Mafuyu's voice had carried over to the other side of the phone, as I heard a painful moan come from Ebichiri. It sounded very much like the dying breath of a cow that was being strangled. I had an urge to throw my cellphone down the toilet and flush it away.

"Well..... urm..... Mafuyu..... Mafuyu-san's..... at my house right now. Yes, since yesterday....."

Even though he doted on his daughter to a point that was beyond salvation, he was also a man that knew his boundaries—I guess that's Ebichiri's biggest misfortune. All I could hear was hot air constantly flowing into the phone; it was as if he were saying "I know you and Mafuyu are already adults that are fully capable of supporting yourselves, and as her parent, I am not in a position to talk too much. But that and my emotions are two separate matters altogether. If you were standing in front of me right now, I would definitely send you flying with a punch!" The silence was unbearable.

"Today is a holiday, but it is still atrocious for working adults to

sleep in until noon!"

In the end, he decided to compromise by lecturing us on our living habits instead. But how does he know I just woke up? Is it because of the laziness in my voice?

"I do not care if you want to emulate Hikawa's lax lifestyle, but do not drag Mafuyu down with you."

"Right..... I'm sorry."

After I said that, my phone was suddenly snatched away from me.

"Papa? Is this Papa? Stop poking your nose into the lives of others! What has this got to do with you!? Didn't I say I would be taking a break until next Monday..... W-What is wrong with that!? That is between Naomi and me!"

What is that father-daughter pair talking about.....? I slid myself back under the blanket and listened to them quarrel for a while. But just as I was about to fall back asleep, I felt the cold sensation of the phone on my ears again.

"Papa says he wants to meet you."

"Huh? Eh? Why?"

Not so that he can punch me, right? Ebichiri's voice sounded through the phone again while I was in a state of panic.

"Back to business. I actually have a favour to ask of you. Do you mind making a trip today? The issue is slightly complicated, so I would like to speak to you in person if that is okay with you."



In the end, Ebichiri asked me to meet him at a music university in Ikebukuro. When that was settled, Mafuyu apologetically told me she didn't want to see her father, so she would go home instead. But personally, I felt sort of saved by her decision, as a three-way talk was the last thing I wanted. Moreover, I didn't think the talk had anything to do with Mafuyu.

But because Mafuyu was going to be busy with things like practices, interviews, recordings and performances after she left, we ended up loitering in my house to delay our reluctant separation.

It was already four in the afternoon when I arrived at the university. I was already late.

"Sorry for being late!"

When I sprinted into the staff room, I was greeted by Ebichiri, whose hair had been graying rapidly recently, and a kind-looking man in his sixties. It seemed like they were having an engaging discussion next to a desk filled with files and scores. They looked at me, and then at the clock; and it was only then that they realized that it was already some time passed the agreed meeting time.

"I am fine with you being late, but you will have to apologize to the professor here. He has kindly offered his place for us to talk, but you have made him wait."

"I am terribly sorry." I apologized by lowering my head in the direction of the person sitting next to Ebichiri. The man was wearing a wool vest over a white shirt.

"It's okay, it's okay. It's the first time we've met. My family name is Katase. You're the son of Hikawa, aren't you? Oh my, you sure take after your father."

"Urm, i-is that so?" I had heard that plenty of times since I had decided to follow Tetsurou's footsteps into the industry, but that was the only time that that comment made me feel uneasy.

"He is Professor Katase. He teaches the history of French music. You can consider him as..... hmm, as my senior."

"Urm..... so he's Kokonoe Hirofume's....."

"Yes, that's right. Ebisawa and I both learned music theory from Professor Kokonoe!" explained Professor Katase.

Kokonoe Hirofume was a renowned Japanese composer and conductor. He had become active in the music scene after World War II, and had participated in the production of many film scores. He was even well received internationally. It is said that he was a really energetic person, and was conducting on stage the day before he died. A lot of his work was also focused on nurturing the next generation of musicians, and plenty of his students had gone on to become well-known musicians in Japan, of which the most successful was probably Ebichiri (and as for the biggest failure.....

I'm afraid that would be Tetsurou).

"The favour that I talked about on the phone is related to Professor Kokonoe."

Said Ebichiri, as he motioned for me to take a seat.

"Well..... do you want me to write a critique?" Honestly speaking, I'm not that familiar with Kokonoe Hirofume.

"No, not that. I want you to investigate something."

Ebichiri then spread a stack of handwritten scores out in front of me. On the aged, yellow paper, were notes arranged neatly on the staves. It was titled with the simple words "Sonate pour deux." On the score was a treble staff and bass staff, so it was likely written for the piano or some other keyboard instrument. The mood was marked as "tendrement"; and though French was a language I had zero knowledge of, I still understand a few commonly used music terms. It means "lovingly." Aside from that though, there were no tempo markings that I could see.

A note with the words "opus postumus" (posthumous work) was stuck to the first page; and it looked pretty new, so it probably hadn't been put there by the person that had collated the scores.

"..... Is this a composition by Kokonoe Hirofume?"

"Is it that obvious?" asked Ebichiri.

"No, I'm not at the stage where I can deduce a person's personality just from the score alone....." I'm barely in the budding stages when it comes to that. "I just thought it might be his work after listening to both of you."

"I think it is Kokonoe Hirofume's work as well, but I have no concrete proof," said Professor Katase.

"So we want you to investigate the origin of this score, to confirm whether or not this is really Professor Kokonoe's work."

Ebichiri then went on to explain the situation, as I was just getting more and more confused.

Apparently, Professor Katase was helping out with a huge documentary series, and as he was compiling the large amount of pieces composed by Kokonoe Hirofume, he discovered these scores

while sorting through the items that Kokonoe had left at the university. It was labeled a posthumous work because they had discovered it after his death, but they weren't sure when it had been composed.

"But this should be nothing more than a draft, right? The notes might be flexible enough, but the fugue only contains two voices throughout. And the bass seems pretty empty as well."

"It is reasonable for you to suspect this is an incomplete work, but Professor Kokonoe was a man that was very rigorous with his words, so it is hard to imagine that this work is incomplete."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It means he was very strict when it came to his compositions!"

Professor Katase elaborated on what Ebichiri had said,

"Back when he was working on soundtracks for movies, he once became extremely furious because the production company had titled his composition 'Symphony of the Seaside'!"

Come to think of it, I did hear that Kokonoe Hirofume was an eccentric man that threw tantrums really often, and that clashed with movie producers for no apparent reason. I had also heard that he had been born into a noble lineage with a long history, but had fallen out with his family after marrying a French woman; and that his family and him barely got in touch with each other after that.

"Therefore..... if it was just a draft, there is no way he would have titled it a sonata. Moreover, Professor Kokonoe would always destroy his drafts whenever he completed his works, probably because he did not want anyone seeing them in their 'incomplete' states....."

"I see. Hmm, but....."—I shifted my attention back to the score—"have either of you played this piece yet?"

Ebichiri and Professor Katase both nodded in response.

"We have, but we cannot call it anything but an incomplete work....."

"But that's contradicting what you said earlier.....?"

"So, because of this title, we're guessing....." said Professor

Katase as he pointed at the words "Sonate pour deux", "What if this sonata is a duet? Perhaps there is another set of scores somewhere."

It roughly translates into "*Sonata for two*" in English, right? It didn't explicitly state the instrument the song was written for, but from the way the score was written, it should've been composed with a keyboard instrument in mind. Is the sonata written for two pianos? Unable to shake away the questions in my mind, I absent-mindedly ran my fingers along the surface of the score filled with notes.

"This place here..... looks really empty for the left hand."

"I started off with that same thought as well....."—Ebichiri stretched out his hand and flipped the score a few pages back—"But there are lots of phrases later on that require both hands to play, so what you're thinking is not exactly right."

I see. The continuous high-pitched trills of the arpeggio—phrases like that do require the use of both hands to perform.

"Moreover..... here, take a look at this word."

Professor Katase pointed at the bottom-right corner of the last page—the word "ensemble" was written there.

Ensemble. That term was used specifically to refer to a small-scale musical ensemble. Meaning..... this piece is indeed written for more than one musical instrument. But then again, the instruments weren't specified on the score, so there was no way we could know for sure.

I guess the mystery lives on. But why is the word "ensemble" written on the final page?

"This is definitely Professor Kokonoe's handwriting, but I'm not sure if this is his composition. It might have been a copy of someone else's work....."

As he said that, Professor Katase removed his spectacles and wiped them.

"Urm....."

I scratched my head. Everything was a mystery.

"May I ask..... why you two chose to approach me regarding this?"

I am totally helpless when it comes to research related to Kokonoe Hirofume....."

"Professor Kokonoe's son is working in that circle of yours, isn't he? Professor Kokonoe's property is all under his care. But he is well known for his dislike of classical music, so it is difficult for us to approach him."

"Ah, I see."

They were right. Music producer Tooru Charlois was the son of Kokonoe Hirofume; and I had seen him several times at the record company as well.

"Urm, but he's a real big shot! There's no way a small fry like me could get in touch with him....."

"I originally wanted to seek Hikawa's assistance, but I could not contact him at all. If I remember right, he is acquainted with Tooru."

Speaking of which, I don't have the slightest clue about what Tetsurou's doing right now either. I can't even reach him through his phone. All he did was send me a simple message saying "I'll be doing an interview in Poland for a few days," and poof, I stopped hearing from him. Nobody knows where on earth he is right now.

"Sadly, there's not much time left. But Ebisawa said Hikawa's son is a pretty dependable person, so I thought I'd try asking you first."

Professor Katase leaned his body forward.

"So what do you think? Can you please help us investigate this matter? I'll definitely compensate you for your trouble, of course. I really want to know if this piece is composed by Professor Kokonoe, and if there's another part to this score as well."

Pressured by the aura of the two men in front of me, the only thing I could do was shift my gaze away from the score.

"..... Why are you so insistent on this particular piece of music? I doubt you are going to compile the full collection of his works, so it should be okay if the compilation is slightly incomplete."

"Everyone knows that most of Professor Kokonoe's works are compositions for the orchestra. But if this is actually his work as well, it will be the only piano sonata he ever composed.

Moreover....."

With a serious expression in his eyes, Ebichiri murmured,

"This score was found in Professor Kokonoe's baton case, which he carried with him all the time. It must be a really special song."



Ebichiri offered to drive me back home, but I solemnly rejected his offer.

"I'll be paying a visit to the publisher, so I don't want to impose on you."

That was the excuse I had conjured up. But the truth was, it would've just been too incredibly awkward talking to Ebichiri in the confined space of a car. But despite having successfully managed to avoid that one plight, I was still given a harsh dressing-down while on my way to the carpark.

"Be honest with me. What is your job right now? I did hear about it a bit from Mafuyu, but I still cannot quite grasp what it is....."

"Ah..... Well....." To be honest, I'm not too sure myself. "I do everything..... And I really do mean everything."

I wasn't even sure where to start regarding the various things I did. It was coming to the point that I was seriously considering whether or not I should write "ruffian of the music industry" in the occupation box on my tax report. I frequently wrote articles for the magazines, and had even written a book with someone else. And since it was rare for critics to actually perform, I was viewed as someone relatively important in the pop music scene because of my uncommon views. Additionally, not only had I been invited to write for quite a few songs (though none of them had sold well), recently, for the first time ever, I was hired to assist in producing a song as well. I was also frequently invited to be the harmony for singers during their recordings.

"So I guess I'm a jack of all trades..... sort of?"

"Hmm..... I am grateful that you are accepting our unreasonable request, but with work like that..... I doubt your lifestyle can be considered normal, right?"

"It stopped being normal the moment I chose to write articles for the magazines....."

"Listen to me carefully....."

Ebichiri's shoes were echoing loudly in the corridor. As he walked half a step ahead of me, he said to me harshly,

"Mafuyu is a professional pianist. That means she needs to maintain her body under a strict regimen, just like athletes do. I do not want to see her falling under your influence after living together with you!"

"Yes, I'm really sorry..... But she doesn't stay overnight at my place all the time. We only lived together for a day....."

Ebichiri turned around and shot a fierce glare at me. We had happened to stop right in front of the gates of the university, so the students walking by were all looking at us in a weird fashion.

"I am not just talking about what happened yesterday. I am also talking about the future as well!"

"Mmm..... Eh? Huh?"

"Did Mafuyu not tell you she would be shifting the focus of her work back to Japan?"

"Ah, she did."

"Then you two should have talked about the future as well, right?"

"..... Talked about what?"

Ebichiri's face was suddenly overtaken by a wave of pity, as well as deep despair.

"..... You are indeed Hikawa's son! I am once again forced to confirm that fact..... Back when he was still young, he caused all sorts of troubles for Misako and for the other women as well....."

Eh? Wait, what's going on here?

The carpark was located right past the school's gates; and there, Ebichiri got into his Toyota Crown, closed the door and drove off in a flash.



Even though feketerigó's glamorous homecoming tour was in full swing when I called her, Kagurazaka-senpai still forced her manager to free up some time so that she could meet up with me. And so, at midnight on the eighth of April, we held a secret meet-up session inside the Tokyo Dome hotel.

"Our American opponents were really strong. It was a complete failure!"

It had been a while since I had seen Senpai. She flashed me a wry smile as she toasted me with a glass of diluted whiskey.

feketerigó—which consisted of Kagurazaka Kyouko (lead vocalist & guitarist) and Aihara Chiaki (drummer)—made its glamorous debut as a hard-rock indie band five years ago. And for a time, Kagurazaka-senpai was dominating the headlines as the revolutionary rock gal. She recently changed her hairstyle to a more mature one, however; but that only made her look even more gorgeous, and served to increase her superstar appeal as well. Worst of all, though, was that she was looking pretty damn sexy in that robe of hers.

"Isn't it a little too early to enter the American market right now? It wouldn't be too late if you wanted to wait until after you had established a firm foothold in Japan first."

Senpai prodded my nose when she heard my silly and unnecessary words.

"It's never too early. All we have to do is try again with new songs. America's a place where they don't care about good or bad. Only the winners are remembered, while the losers are duly forgotten—that's what I like about that place. So I'll be heading overseas once more, hitching a ride with my cigars and pies as I streak across the plains beneath the moonlight, transferring between buses—chasing after my American dream!"

There wasn't the slightest hint of depression in Senpai's smile.

Even though it was called a "glamorous homecoming tour," feketerigó's record sales in America were far from encouraging. But Senpai was a revolutionary through and through, so it was pretty much impossible for her to give up on standing at the peak of the world to settle for just Japan.

"But, of course, I can consider changing the order if you're feeling lonely and want me to stay in Japan."

"It does feel a little lonely when it becomes difficult for us to meet up..... But what do you mean by changing the order?"

"I had planned to conquer the world before making babies with you, but I'm okay with switching the two around!"

I held my glass of wine tightly in my hands as I retreated and leapt over the bed, making my way towards the side of the door.

"It took you that long to realize my motive despite you coming to a hotel room by yourself in the middle of the night? You're as cute as ever!"

"U-Urm, Senpai..... enough with" the jokes—I shut my mouth before I could finish my sentence. Unable to look into Senpai's eyes, I turned my back to her while holding my wine glass next to my chest.

That wasn't a joke. The revolutionary of love never lied to herself, and would never lie to the world either. She really hasn't changed the slightest bit—she still crossed the boundaries of my imagination with ease and spread her wings out, just like she had always done.

"Relax, Comrade Hikawa. That was just a joke."

Right, one thing had changed though—she no longer addressed me as "young man." Not because I had become older, of course; but because she had finally started seeing me as her fellow comrade.

"Comrade Ebisawa just returned to Japan, didn't she? I have no intention of making her feel depressed!"

I turned towards Senpai again and made my way back to the side of the bed.

"I'll lay my hands on you only after I've obtained Comrade Ebisawa's blessing." So it's contingent on a term like that huh? I guess it would still be safer to sit as far away from her as possible.

"Are you keeping in touch with Mafuyu? I don't think the media has reported her return just yet....."

"It's not only that, I also ran into her at Houston."

"Eh?"

"You see, the bonds between us are just impossibly difficult to sever! Our performances happened to be on the same day, so I brought Comrade Aihara along and nonchalantly snuck into the hotel that Comrade Ebisawa was staying at."

"Don't sneak into a hotel nonchalantly!" That's a crime!

"And the three of us talked till dawn!"

"..... I'm quite envious of that....."

"Comrade Aihara and I picked up quite a bit of information from our relentless attacks too! So you tilt your face to the right when you kiss?"

"W-What? You bombarded Mafuyu with questions like that!?"

"Nope. I was just fishing information out of you."

"What!?"

"You're as simple as ever! Questions like these are 50-50, so you should know I'm just making them up!"

"How would I know that!? That isn't something people typically do!"

"Also, based on the accumulation of my experiences, it seems like more people prefer tilting their face to the right!"

How much longer do I have to be led by the nose by Senpai? Come to think of it..... "You've kissed enough people to be able to come up with a statistic like that?"

"Yeah, but you're the only male I've ever kissed."

"Don't fabricate lies like that! I've never once kissed you!"

Senpai let out a laugh and rolled about on bed.

"Oh, we did talk about things like that when we were chatting though, and it seemed like she was actually getting really worried! She kept wondering about just how intimate we were being back in Japan, and even talked about things like returning to Japan without Ebisawa Chisato after finishing her tour. So what happened?"

"So you're the reason she returned to Japan earlier than expected....."

Still..... I was really happy that Mafuyu had returned to Japan early, and that I had even gotten to pick her up at the airport.

"And I heard she won't be leaving Japan anytime soon? I see, so that's why you couldn't reject Ebisawa Chisato's request! Well, I guess you do need to leave a good impression on your future father-in-law."

I was a little stunned when Senpai pulled us back on topic. Oh right, that's the reason I called Senpai in the first place.

"That's not really why I agreed to his request..... Also, Ebichiri and I have already known each other for ages now, so why should I take his impression of me to heart?"

"It's okay if you haven't picked up on it!" Senpai laughed it off with a wave of her hand. "But do fill me in on what's going on."

It felt like there was something deeper behind Senpai's words; but it wouldn't do if I just kept dancing along to her lead either, so I began talking to her about the <Fire-thieving Moths> sonata, as well as Kokonoe Hirofume's son, Tooru Charlois.

"A piece composed by Tooru's father huh..... I see, so you're asking me to pull some strings for you?"

"Yeah. I remember there were plans to have him as the producer of feketerigó, right? So I was wondering if you were still in contact with him....."

"Those plans of having Tooru be our producer were blown out of the water after we had a huge quarrel....."

"Eh..... A huge quarrel?"

"The first time we met, Tooru talked about things like wanting pretty graduates from the idol academy to join us as our bassist and keyboardist..... I don't think he had listened to our music at all prior to that. In any case, he was trying to force us to accept his plan to transform the band into a typical business unit, so I began rattling on about how that idea was incredibly stupid, and ended up pissing him off....."

Of course he was going to get pissed off! What the hell did you think you were doing, saying things like that to a big-shot producer who's almost twenty years your senior? So..... that means, it was all just wishful thinking on my part?

"And after that, Tooru and I became drinking buddies."

"Oh well, I guess the only thing left is to try to find Tetsurou somehow—Ehhhhhh? What did you just say?"

Didn't you quarrel with him?

"Isn't there a saying that goes, 'Great affection is often the cause of violent animosity'?"

"That only applies to close friends, doesn't it!?" You quarreled with him on your very first meeting with him!

"Tooru's too busy to even clean his own ass after he's done on the toilet, so I'm not too sure I can get you an appointment with him. But I'll try to contact him anyway. I should do it sometime in the next two days."

"Thanks a lot, you're a great help."

The greatest asset a man can have is his contacts—it was only after I had entered the industry that I finally came to appreciate this fact. Back when I was young, I used to think, "That's what makes us impure as we gradually grow older!" But that's all in the past now.

"You don't have to thank me. You do know I'm not doing this for free, right?"

I was incredibly frightened when I saw the grin on Senpai's face.

"Urm..... well..... I don't think I'll be getting much money from this....."

"I never said I wanted money! How about paying with your body instead?"



I could do nothing but run away when I heard Senpai say that. She had said that while laying down on the bed with nothing but a robe

on her. But as I was retreating back in the direction of the door, it opened suddenly, causing me to crash outside the room.

"I'm back, Senpai! Sheesh, I had to go all the way to the convenience store across the station to get some mint chocolate ice cream, since they don't sell it around here—Eh? Nao? What are you doing here?"

"It took you too damn long to notice! You even walked over me as you entered the room, so why are you still surprised!?"

Chiaki was wearing a jersey and was holding plastic bags in her hands. Her eyes were opened wide in surprise. She then begrudgingly pulled me up.

"So what are you doing here? Look at the time!"

"It's easier for him to assault us in the middle of the night!"

"Senpai! Please keep your mouth shut!" But before I could even finish my retort, the furious Chiaki had already grabbed ahold of my collar; and in the next second, the world flipped half a circle around me, and my back was slammed hard against the ground.

"This hip sweep is for Mafuyu."

And before I could even speak again, Chiaki was already locking my arms with her limbs.

"And this armlock is for me!"

"Ow ow ow ow it's gonna break, it's gonna break!"

I could hear frightening popping sounds coming from my joints as I frantically explained everything to Chiaki.



"Why didn't you tell me Nao was coming to visit?"

"At the very least, inform me that you're sharing a room with Chiaki!"

"But I wouldn't have been able to enjoy the sweet moments alone with Comrade Hikawa if I had told you beforehand! I even deliberately sent you out just so I could create that opportunity, Comrade Aihara!"

"You're really terrible! Can you please treasure the only remaining band member?"

"Nao, you're in no position to say that, since you're not treasuring Mafuyu at all!"

Huh? I-Is that so? But I do intend to treasure her properly.....

"Isn't Mafuyu returning to Japan for the long term? And she should've asked you what your plans were for the future too, right?"

"Well, yeah....."

"Then why didn't you propose?"

I was stunned. Propose?

"Comrade Aihara, it's not exactly the best idea to just tell him something as important as that straight to his face."

Kagurazaka-senpai shook her head worryingly and sighed.

"But stupid Nao would've never realized it for the rest of his life if I hadn't said it just now! I'd feel so sorry for Mafuyu."

"Because now's not the time!"

"Rubbish, it's already extremely late. They've been going out for six years already!"

"They'll have to wait until after my worldwide revolution succeeds and I shatter this saddening and barbaric system in our civilized society—I'm referring to monogamy, of course."

"We should be aiming for revolutions that are way more meaningful than that! How about inventing a totally transparent drum set so that the audience can see the drummer in full view during the performance?"

"I'm looking at Comrade Aihara all the time, even when I am facing the audience while we're on stage!"

"Thank you! I love you, Senpai!"

The two members of feketerigó were totally ignoring me as they began their nonsensical conversation. But I wasn't in the mood to listen to them.

"Senpai, Nao looks really depressed!" Chiaki prodded my temple.

"Premarital blues?"

"But they haven't even decided to marry yet!"

Marriage huh..... So that's what Ebichiri was referring to? Mafuyu's returning to Japan for the long term..... Is that why Ebichiri asked me what I was planning to do for the future?

No, not just Ebichiri..... Even Mafuyu had mentioned something like that as well.....

"Your expression's saying 'I finally understand now,' you know?" Chiaki moved her face close to mine.

"Mmm, yeah....."

"Well, I'll be nice and assume that both Nao and Mafu-Mafu have just been really busy..... But knowing what I know about Nao, I doubt you have even thought about this before, right?"

Just what you'd expect of a friend of over twenty years. You do know me well.

"So? Do you want to get married?"

"I don't know."

"You actually said you don't know!? You're just....."

"..... Do I have to?"

"That's not the problem here!"

"May I voice the view of a typical person, however rare it may be for me?"

Kagurazaka-senpai sat up and hugged Chiaki from behind.

"There's no point in you getting all heated up over this, yeah? This is the fatal difference between the sexes, a destiny that has been carved deep into our chromosomes. Even in death, men will never understand how essential marriage is, so the reason Comrade Hikawa's acting this way is not because he is incredibly dense up there! But that's not necessarily the case when it comes to other things."

"Really? Did you hear what Senpai said? That's great for you, Nao!"

I don't quite understand how that's "great." Come to think of it, not

only is Senpai not standing up for me, it feels like she's insulting me in a really roundabout way too, right?

"In any case, you two should get married already! Only then can I wed Senpai in peace!"

♪ ♭ ♪

Chiaki then chased me out of the room, and I left the hotel right after. It was already late at night, and I was being blown about by the strong winds that stank of exhaust, and that were weaving through the towering buildings. I crossed the overhead bridge, making my way towards the Suidobashi station; but it took me a while before I realized the last train had already left a long time ago.

While standing distractedly at the end of the queue for a taxi, I thought about what Senpai and Chiaki had said, and recalled Mafuyu's unhappy expression as she puffed her cheeks.

Marriage..... me and Mafuyu? What does it mean..... to be married? Visiting the parents of our other half, and introducing them at a restaurant? But Ebichiri and Tetsurou already know each other anyway. Then, Mafuyu and I would get a house, and would live together. We would move there..... prepare for our wedding, and send out invitation cards—we'd have to invite a lot of people in the industry, especially if we take into account the people Mafuyu is acquainted with also. Is that all?

When I finally calmed down, I realized my true feelings.

To be honest, it feels incredibly troublesome.....

♪ ♭ ♪ ♪

Two days later, Kagurazaka-senpai called me in the afternoon. At the time, I was at a studio in Shinjuku, splicing a number of irritating samples together into a tape loop. I mistook the ringtone as part of the sample, so it took me a while to realize it was actually my phone.

"I got an appointment with Tooru for you. The meeting is..... thirty minutes from now."

"Wha....." I was rendered speechless for a moment, as the news had come to me very suddenly. Thirty minutes? It was incredibly

noisy on the other side of the phone. I can hear the sounds of a train, so Senpai should be somewhere near a station or something.

"Sorry, I'm really busy too. I'm currently at the Nagoya station, and have a rehearsal later."

"Ah—Sorry for having you call despite your busy schedule."

"In any case, he's only free from two-thirty to three."

"Urm, but..... I'm also in the middle of work right now. This is just too sudden....."

It seemed like Tooru Charlois was chairing an audition at a certain studio in Shinjuku; and upon further questioning, I realized he was actually in the same building I was already in. What a lucky break.

"All the best to you. And also....."

Senpai continued on quickly,

"I am really interested in that sonata, if it actually does exist. I like Kokonoe Hirofume as well!"

Senpai was the same as ever. She was great at spurring people on without much effort.

The audition was being held in a huge studio in the basement, so I did my best to finish my work within thirty minutes, then sprinted towards the lift. As I was making my way to the studio, I brushed by several people with guitar cases on their backs.

"Hikawa? What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in studio C?"

One of the sound engineers whom I was acquainted with saw me, so I hastily replied, "I'm looking for Mr. Tooru....." I ended up missing the control room, and to make matters worse, stumbled straight into the main booth instead. I was dumbfounded when I saw rows and rows of guitar amplifiers, synthesizers and microphone stands. The thick soundproof door then shut itself behind me.

"Next! Eh? Where's his profile at? What's your name?"

A rough voice blared through the monitor speakers, causing me to turn towards the control room. I recognized Tooru Charlois right away. The bridge of his nose was unnaturally high for a Japanese man, and his bronzed looks were nowhere close to looking like a forty-year-old's. Despite having openly renounced his desire to

perform on stage, he still emitted a dazzling aura that befitted a main vocalist. It felt as though he could still easily attract enough fans to fill up the Nippon Budokan at any given time.^[1]

"Ah, urm..... Good afternoon, my name is Hikawa Naomi." Overwhelmed by his charisma, I began meekly introducing myself before I even knew what I was doing.

"What are you gonna play? The keyboard? Play a rhythm track for him. Hey! Time's precious, so what are you standing there for? Don't you have the scores there?"

"R-Right....."

I stood in front of the power switch of the synthesizer and gazed at the chord chart in confusion. Accompanied by the demo track—which consisted of only the guitar, electric drums and vocals—I improvised a piece on the keyboard.

"Add in some harmony. Hum to the tune at the end of the song."

I did as I was told by Mr. Tooru, and leaned towards the microphone to briefly hum the tune. When I was done with my performance, his criticism came after a brief "che."

"That's some shitty technique! You should focus on singing and forget about playing any instruments! Let's continue..... Huh? You're ending it like this?"

"Ah..... urm, pardon me!"

I shouted in a hurry when I saw Mr. Tooru turn his head towards the music director to discuss something.

"I'm not here for the auditions. Urm..... Kagurazaka Kyouko of feketerigó should have spoken to you about this. My name is Hikawa Naomi, and I'd like to speak with you for a while."

Mr. Tooru frowned and stared at me—it almost felt like his gaze had pierced through the glass panel of the control room.

I was then made to wait outside for close to twenty minutes. I almost gave up, and thought about heading back to the studio to finish up my work. I might not be a professional keyboardist, but it's still pretty depressing to have producer Tooru Charlois criticize my keyboard skills.

Being the child of a famous personality in the classical music world—and at the same time, a mixed-blood—he reminded me of Mafuyu. But Tooru Charlois chose a very different path from her. He severed his relationship with his father completely, choosing to debut in the pop music scene at the age of nineteen. He ended up writing a lot of songs for various singers, and all of them had sold very well; but on the flip side, his band had undergone several member changes because of his uncompromising personality. And in the end, he announced that he would never get on stage again.

For a young gun like me, Tooru Charlois was a legend. My stomach hurt when I thought about having to talk to him in person—moreover, I'd be making a rather demanding request of him.

My legs didn't respond, even as the door opened right before my eyes. Mr. Tooru stepped into the corridor, nodded at the higher-ups of the record company, and spoke a few words. Then, when he was done, he stepped past me.

"Ah, pardon me! I'm really sorry for interrupting, but I have an appointment with you....."

Mr. Tooru clicked his tongue and shot me a glance as sharp as an owl's.

"I've already pretended to have forgotten about this, so can't you pretend to not have seen me?"

No way? What's with that unreasonable attitude of his? Having failed his charade of not noticing my presence, Mr. Tooru resorted to childish tricks to try to shake me off: there was an attempt where he tried to sneak away by asking me to get him a pack of cigarettes, and another where he feigned a stomach ache and ran towards the elevator rather than the toilet. But in the end, it seemed he had finally given up on trying to get away from me, as he had sit himself down on a chair in the lounge.

"Sorry for making this demanding request, but I have something important to discuss with you."

I was shocked by how my words were gradually becoming less and less formal. Come to think of it, this guy reminds me a little of Tetsurou. Oh yeah, Tetsurou did say before that he was acquainted with him.....

"So what's up with Tetsurou? He used to follow me around all the time, sniffing like a pig. Yet, not too long ago, he disappeared all of a sudden."

Mr. Tooru lit a Marlboro as he said that.

"He said he was going to Poland, then disappeared without a trace."

"Oh? So you've followed in his footsteps and walked the path of an irritating industry ruffian? I thought it was strange that Kyouko was acting all sugary sweet over the phone..... Damn it!"

Looks like he really detests me, so much that he would burn me with his cigarette if given the chance. What a pain..... But time was running out, so I had no option but to get to the point as carefully as I could.

"Urm..... You should know who Ebisawa Chisato and Professor Katase Ryouichi are..... right? They were both students of Mr. Kokonoe Hirofume—can you please stop that!? It burns!"

He really did shove his cigarette butt in my direction. Are you a kid?

"What? So you're from the College of Music? I don't want to hear anything about my pops, so scram!"

"Do you..... hate your father..... that much?"

"I said I have no intention of listening any further, didn't I?"

Mr. Tooru stood up and was about to leave, but I sprang up and blocked his path.

"I just want you to allow Professor Katase to handle Mr. Kokonoe's items! He's currently working on a compilation of Kokonoe Hirofume's works. You should have the key to the house in Meguro, right?"

"I have no intention of ever returning to that place, so god knows where I've left the keys! When we were working out the inheritance, the noble family and their opinions were a pain in the ass as well. I plan to raze that house down sometime soon, so stop mentioning that irritating family name!"

It took me a while to understand something.

So the reason Mr. Tooru chose to use "Charlois" as his family name..... was not because it was a stage name. Could "Charlois" be his mother's family name? He hates the name "Kokonoe," so that's why.....?

"Pop's works are nothing more than just trash, pieces that'll be forgotten as time passes on! Are those geezers at the College of Music so crappy that they have to sink their claws into that old stuff?"

After saying that, Mr. Tooru began making his way towards the elevator, so I grabbed his shoulder on reflex. Noticing my intentions, he turned around with a savage expression on his face.

"..... What do you think you're doing?"

"Urm, well..... pardon me, but....."

The calm part of me was whispering, "Stop! What the hell do you think you're doing!? He's a big shot in the industry! Don't even think about surviving in this line of work if you piss him off!"—and things like that. But I couldn't swallow what Mr. Tooru had said earlier.

Classical music wasn't about sinking our hands into old stuff.

"..... I heard..... the song you produced last month....."

Mr. Tooru's slightly-tanned and aged—but handsome—face cringed in skepticism. Behind him, his assistants and staff were all looking at us worryingly. But I continued on.

"The horn section during the huge finale—you took it from the main theme of Kokonoe Hirofume's <Yakushi Symphony>. I've listened to the unreleased album—a portion of it anyway. It's unlikely that you'd use the theme in loops if you weren't paying respect to a certain someone, right?"

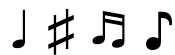
A huge sound echoed throughout the basement studio. The guys around us all shuddered at the same time.

An ashtray flew towards me, away from the desk Mr. Tooru had kicked with all his might, and smashed into the ground and broke into pieces.

Under the fearful gaze of everyone, Mr. Tooru disappeared into the elevator. Everyone looked as if they had something to say to me, but

no one approached me. But those words of mine—that were interrupted halfway—were still burning in my heart.

Music was not something that harassed someone endlessly. It was just something that would burn itself deep inside your soul, and remain there unforgotten. That was the power of music. Mr. Tooru should understand that as well, shouldn't he?



When I returned home that day, I immediately put on my headphones and lay down beside my desk. I had really regretted what I had done. What the heck was I doing? I actually pissed Tooru Charlois off. After learning what had happened, a few of my friends had offered me a few words of consolation, while others recommended that I take a break from work and go on a spa holiday for a month. There was even a kind someone who introduced me to a writing gig for some porn magazine. And thanks to all the heart-warming attacks I had received from everyone around me, I had trudged back home feeling really depressed.

What should I do if I've really pissed him off and don't receive any more job offers as a result? My highest qualification is only a high school education, and it's not like I have any other skills.....

A long time had passed before I had realized how late it was. My room was all dark, and it was Mafuyu who ended up coming in to turn on the lights.

"Sorry, I came here without asking since you were not picking up my calls."

Mafuyu sat in seiza in front of the desk and apologetically lowered her head.

"Ah..... Nah, it's okay. I'm sorry I didn't notice."

"Did something bad..... happen at work?"

Eh? Is it that obvious?

"Because Naomi only listens to punk music when you are in a pinch!"

Explained Mafuyu, as she pointed at the Ramones CD case. I

didn't even know that about myself—and had only become aware of it after she had pointed it out. Now that's embarrassing. It's as though I haven't grown a single bit since high school. Actually, that does seem to be the case.

"Mafuyu, I....."

Suddenly, words of unease began leaking out of my mouth.

"I've pissed off an important person, so I may..... not be able to receive any more jobs in the future. So....."

It isn't the time to be talking about marriage yet. My work is incredibly unstable, and I am such an immature brat.

I couldn't help but think about things like that, despite the fact that Mafuyu had said nothing about marrying me just yet. But Mafuyu replied,

"It is okay. I will be the breadwinner then."

"Eh? Ah, no..... but..... is that okay?"

So she's okay with me being a house husband? I wasn't too comfortable with that idea. Preparing meals for Mafuyu and sending her off to work..... Though, that wouldn't be too different from the way things are already.

"..... Can't we let our relationship..... stay the way it is?"

That was a pretty devastating sentence from me. Mafuyu's face reddened in an instant, but there was none of her usual harsh words. With her lips trembling slightly, she moved towards me while on her knees, then laid her cheek down on my thighs.

Her maroon hair slid into the space in-between my fingers; and even though I couldn't see her expression, I was still depressed by her refusal to look at me.

"Is my presence a bother to Naomi? Is it because there is nothing we can share between us?"

"W-What are you talking about? How can that be?"

Mafuyu lifted her misty eyes and glanced at me briefly, then lowered her head again, rubbing her cheeks against my thighs. We remained silent for a long time as we huddled up against each other.

Finally, I told her about what had happened over the past few days. About Ebichiri and Professor Katase's request, about looking up Kokonoe Hirofume and his son Tooru Charlois, and about that fascinating sonata as well. Mafuyu lifted her head slowly and listened intently to what I had to say.

When I was done, I passed Mafuyu the photocopied scores Professor Katase had given me.

"..... Can you play this for me?"

Mafuyu nodded, scanning through the notes on the score as she flipped the pages. She then murmured,

"This may be a score for a duet."

I see, so it indeed might be a duet. Regardless of the additional instruments required, the bass portion was still lacking for a sonata. But if it was a piece that required four hands, a piece that required two to play the piano at the same time, then it all made sense.

Mafuyu sat before the electric piano and flexed her fingers a little. She then placed the score on the music stand and began hitting the keys at a slow tempo.

The inflowing piano was especially frustrating to listen to. The fugue lacked a counterpart, so the tune was forced to move forward endlessly without resolving any of the tension. And the endearing melody was brutally fleeting, as though it were a dream that one saw on and off in his shallow sleep, but couldn't remember the details of after waking up. Mafuyu started out playing the piece with only her right hand, but later in the piece, she extended her left hand out. The finely segregated notes were turning into glittering particles of light.

Halfway into the piece, the performance suddenly stopped. It felt like I was being strangled.

"I cannot, this is impossible to play."

I directed my eyes at the score. She can't play it? Is it too difficult even for Mafuyu?

"I have absolutely no idea how the other half is written, so I have no clue how to play this portion either. That is why it is impossible to play."

I see. That's the sort of view you'd expect from a professional pianist—the portrayal of music isn't based solely on regurgitating what's written in the score. Now I want to locate the complete score and listen to the piece in its entirety.

But all of a sudden, a question appeared in my mind. For argument's sake, let's assume this is a part of a whole..... But why just a part?

If we were talking about a symphony, it would be typical to create separate parts for the different instruments based on the full score, as the full score would consist of way too many instruments and individual staves, and would probably only be able to accommodate four bars of notes per page. That would be impractical to use for rehearsals. But for the sonata in this score..... The modern definition of the term "sonata" is very different from what it used to mean; the current definition is used to describe a solo performance, or some light indoor music that employs a piano and one or two other instruments. So using the full score shouldn't be too much of a hindrance. But it was just as Mafuyu said, it was impossible to interpret the song fully without having seen the complete score.^[2]

The problem is..... with the way things are right now, the door to Mr. Tooru is slammed shut. Kagurazaka-senpai had kindly hooked me up with him, and yet.....

I dropped onto my bed in exasperation. Mafuyu sat next to me on the side of the bed and stared at my face.

"..... You are searching for the other parts of that piece, aren't you?"

"Yeah..... but I'm out of options now. I think the only reason Ebichiri asked for my assistance was because he thought I had some connections with Mr. Tooru."

Unexpectedly, Mafuyu put on a sad expression.

"I would love to play the piece if you can complete it."

I sat up quickly in shock.

"Why?"

"Why..... Because the completed work should be a pretty nice piece of music. And I do like Kokonoe Hirofume as well."

I was surprised by Mafuyu's words. She had said the exact same thing as someone else.

"You're saying the exact same thing Senpai did....."

Right after I said that, I realized I had made a mistake. Mafuyu's maroon hair flinched.

"Kyouko? When did you meet up with Kyouko?"

"Eh? Ah..... urm..... right after I accepted this request, so..... approximately two days ago?"

"They should have just returned to Tokyo from Sapporo that day, and even had a concert at the Tokyo Dome that night. So how exactly did you manage to see her?"

Why do you know all these details? Are you keeping track of feketerigó's movement all the time?

"Urm..... she made some time for me, and told me to meet her in her room at midnight."

"At midnight!? And in her room too?"

"Ah! Well..... it wasn't just the two of us, of course! Chiaki was there too."

"Chiaki too!?!?"

Why the hell am I digging my grave deeper and deeper?

"Sorry! Well..... it's not like I was deliberately trying to hide it from you. It's just that I had heard about the things that had happened in Houston, so telling you would've been a little embarrassing....."

"They even told you about what had happened in Houston!?"

Mafuyu's face was turning redder and redder, probably because she was recalling the sexual harassment Senpai had committed against her back in Houston. She grabbed a pillow and began swinging it constantly at my face.

What ended up saving me was the sudden ringtone coming from my cellphone.

"Sorry..... Mafuyu, wait! It's a call from the producer, so stop..... shush."

I jumped off my bed and ran next to the window before picking the

call up.

"..... Yes, it's me. No no, I'm not sleeping yet, so it's okay..... Eh? Ah..... yeah..... right, right. About what happened in the afternoon, that was..... I don't know how to put it..... It's just..... Eh? What? Mr. Tooru said that? I see..... No no no, I'll accept the offer. Right..... no no no, of course. Okay, see you."

Mafuyu was confused as she watched me end the call while nodding my head repeatedly.

"What happened? Did he really cut away all job offers for you?"

"Urm, not really—"

In all honesty, I couldn't quite believe the conversation I just had either. I could only stare at my phone in a daze.

"I was..... offered a job. Tooru Charlois was the one who made the request."



It was just as Ebichiri had said when he asked me that question I had scrambled to answer; I kept getting job offers that somehow came to me without me knowing why they did. The more popular job requests though, were for my articles, samples, and music arrangements.

"Here are the sounds taken from the Chuo line; these are the sounds from the Tokaido Shinkansen; and those are the sounds from the waterwheel cabin. Use the exhaust from the Harley as the bass, and Bartok's quartet as the background. Get me a loop running before eight!"

Immediately after I showed up at the studio, Mr. Tooru started barking orders at me while pointing at the PC screen.

"Before eight?"

Does this guy here understand how much time is required to fine-tune samples from non-musical instruments? And I pissed him off just yesterday, didn't I? Why is he seeking my service today? I was dying to ask him these questions.

"Quit complaining! I'm paying you, so get your ass moving!"

Some of the audio engineers, as well as the artists that looked younger than me, were flashing a wry smile in my direction. Seems like Tooru Charlois's unreasonable demands aren't anything new.

"Yes, I'll get to it right away."

I bowed, and did my best to put on a really apologetic expression as I sat myself down in front of the PC.

"Pardon me..... but aren't you angry?"

"Do I look like I'm not?"

I shrunk my neck.

"I brought you here to grant you the opportunity to apologize!"

That's so touching I'm close to tears. For the next few hours, I was hounded by comments like "That's not right" and "This won't do" coming from behind me, while also having my collar pulled from behind. I finally completed a rhythmic loop that consisted of the sound of the trains, the waterwheel, the motorcycle and Bartok's quartet, all mashed up together. Who the hell even came up with such a combination?

"Wow, Mr. Hikawa's abilities are for real! We'll be depending on you for our next album as well, okay?"

After listening to my finished work, the lead vocalist—who was in his teens—exclaimed that passionately as he came over to shake my hand. However—"I hope we can use the samples from the right-wing's propaganda vans, as well as the sirens from the American base, in our next project!" It's best you guys scrap that idea of yours, yeah?

That night, Mr. Tooru invited me to a pub in Shinjuku for a beer. And to make matters worse, it was just me and him alone. Inside the pub, silent films from way back were playing on a big screen while jazz performed by a large ensemble was gently playing over the stereos. It was quite a snazzy bar.

"Urm, well..... thanks..... a lot for today."

"What for?"

"Thanks for..... offering me the job."

Mr. Tooru gave a "hmmph" as he allowed a shot of bourbon to flow

down his throat.

"You graduated from the College of Music?" That was sudden.

"N-Nah, I only have high school qualifications."

"Really? So how do you know about the alto clef then?"

"Because you have to know how to read the orchestra scores when you're doing critiques..... So that means Mr. Tooru can read the alto clef as well? That's surprising!"

Alto clef was not a musical notation that you would typically learn about in music lessons at school. I gradually got used to it only when I began dictating the viola parts when I was adjusting different audio sources.

"I was forced to learn it by my pops. He would force me to sit in front of the piano when I was finished with school, and would beat me up if I stopped practicing, even just a little."

"Ah, I see....."

"And before he had even forced me to learn the piano, he did the same to my ma first. Ma had never even touched the piano prior to knowing him! Pops got to know my ma at the hospital when he was receiving treatment in France, though she was just a patient as well. I heard the geezers and hags from the Kokonoe family got into a huge quarrel with him since they opposed the marriage."

"Why..... is that so?"

"Well, they nitpicked about things like my Ma being a foreigner, her body being too frail, and the difficulty she would have conceiving, things like that. Those are the kinds of thoughts you'd come to expect from the moldy brains of those old people. Before, Pops had shown no interest in getting married, despite the fact that he was past the age of forty, so the noble family set their eyes on some suitable candidates, and even arranged a few matchmaking sessions as well. Guess the family opposed the marriage 'cause all their efforts had gone to waste?"

That was just over ten years ago. Such practices still existed back then..... I guess, even to this very day, there are still families that are prissy about things like that.

"The reason Pops and Ma had me, and the reason Pops had made her learn the piano, was so that he could get approval from the family. Or at least, that's what my grandpa and grandma said."

Proof that she was essential to him, whether as his wife or as his musical partner—but was it really necessary to get approval from his parents for something like that?

"Ma died when I was in elementary school, so it turned into a situation where I was forced to sit before the piano instead. To that person, we were nothing but musical instruments."

I could say nothing in reply to that, so I just took a gulp of the bitter cocktail instead.

But..... if that's the case, why did Mr. Tooru pay respect to that song composed by Kokonoe Hirofume? Actually, let's not bring that up just yet—why did Mr. Tooru step into the world of music in the first place?

Mr. Tooru downed his whiskey in a large gulp and slammed his glass on the table.

"Do you enjoy taking the trains?"

Another question out of the blue. I turned my head to the side and stared at the side profile of Mr. Tooru's face, defined clearly by crisp lines.

"..... Not really. I don't like the crowds."

"Me too. But if the sounds of the train were suitable for work, then you'd use them, right?"

I was speechless.

"Urm..... So..... you offered me a job just to tell me that?"

"How could that be!?"

Mr. Tooru elbowed me in my side.

"You honestly have no clue, do you? You know what, I hate people like you as well—people that lack the brains, that are acquainted with a bunch of people from the College of Music, and that just keep pushing themselves onto others. But I've decided to use you, since you're good with the synthesizers. That's all."

I see. That's incredibly depressing. I couldn't even let out a sigh.

"I know that what I'm doing is no different from what my Pops did. This is just disgusting."

So Kokonoe Hirofume didn't love his wife, and saw her only as a human instrument—that doesn't sound right. It was just weird. His wife didn't even know how to play the piano before she met him, right?

And things didn't make sense from Mrs. Kokonoe's perspective either. If things were as Mr. Tooru had said, then why did she cross the ocean to follow that man to Japan, and even end up marrying him? Moreover, all of the relatives in his family opposed the marriage, so why the insistence?

While I was pondering the issue, Mafuyu's depressed expression showed itself again and again in my head.

Why do people get married?



"Well, because..... our wallets will merge into one when we become married, so all the cash I owe her will disappear! You can't do that if you're just going out with her, can you?"

Those were the first words my dad Tetsurou—whom I hadn't seen in a long while—said to me when he finally returned to Japan.

"You're just trash..... How much did you borrow from Misako?"

"Don't know. Somewhere around two million?"

"Two million? You borrowed two million back when you were just a college student?"

"Oh well, it's not a lot of cash....."

"How's that 'not a lot'!? Do you know how long two million would last me if I could use it to pay the rent for this apartment?"

"Oh yeah, are you planning to move out of here? Daddy wants to live in a landed property with a courtyard!"

Tetsurou lay down on my bed and stretched himself as he took a sip of his canned coffee, then scanned the four-square-meter room.

"Lil Mafuyu should command a sizeable salary, so how about a house in Tokyo? You'll have to first decide how many children you're planning to have in the future though!"

"That's not something you have to worry about, so shut it!"

Why are you worrying about things like that in my stead?

"I might turn into a senile old man too, so you'll have to have a room prepared to look after old geezers like me. And make sure Mafuyu wears a nurse outfit as well!"

You're already a senile middle-aged man, aren't you? Tetsurou's supposed to be the same age as Ebichiri, so why does he always act like a scrappy student who keeps failing his entrance exam?

"And Misako, why on earth did she wed you..... Ah, so that she can chase after your debts?"

"How rude! We swore to live together till death because we loved each other!"

"Then why the divorce!?" How's that living together till death!?

"So when are you making your vows? Don't invite me to your wedding ceremony! Those long-winded people from the College of Music will definitely be there as well....."

"Nah..... I'm not planning to hold a wedding ceremony."

"Why?"

"Why..... huh?"

I turned towards the desk. My blank gaze floated towards the laptop screen. I had no idea how to reply to that. Why? I'd love to know the answer myself.

"..... Why is marriage necessary? Mafuyu hasn't even told me outright that she wants to get married. Why is everyone acting like I'm committing some sort of heinous crime if we don't get married?"

I heard a sudden snicker. Turning my head around, all I could see was Tetsurou's shoulders trembling nonstop as he sat cross-legged on my bed.

"Because it has to be you who pops the question!"

"Yeah, the guy has to be the one to propose. What a silly practice

—"

"It's not just a practice! There are actually valid reasons behind it. I was the one who proposed to Misako as well!"

"So you took the initiative and said, 'Let's erase all of my debts after our marriage!' Was that it? Really?"

My dad was undoubtedly the worst person on earth.

"Yeah! That's a must. Just..... I don't think you understand right now, do you?"

The way he said that was just infuriating. It sounded like I was still just a kid in his eyes.

But..... I may have been being an ignorant brat this whole time. At the very least, Tetsurou has already gone through this before—so I couldn't retort him despite my desire to. Come to think of it, Kagurazaka-senpai had said something similar too.

"In any case, it's love!"

"The love you're talking about is erasing all the debts you owe?"

"Lil Nao, there are many different facets to love! You'll understand sooner or later. It was the same for that Kokonoe as well! Do you have any idea how many relatives he had? There were enough people for three orchestras! Moreover, all of them had come from well-to-do families as well. I saw the scene of his relatives gathered at his funeral—the atmosphere might've been enough to scare the dead back alive! He chose his wife despite the strong opposition from his parents, his grandparents and his numerous aunts and uncles. Do you have any idea how much resolve was required to do that?"

Tetsurou then walked towards the sound system and took out one of Mr. Big's albums from the cabinet. Eric Martin's hoarse voice was accompanied by choppy sounds of the orchestra.

<Nothing but Love>.

Love..... was something that I thought only appeared in the lyrics of songs. And when that word came up in a conversation between me and my father—honestly, it was a little disgusting.

"Oh right, you know anything about Kokonoe's wife, Tetsurou?"

I didn't have the slightest clue about her. All I knew was that her name was Rosary Charlois; and even that was something I had only recently come to know.

"Nope, I don't. His wife was already dead when I met Kokonoe. And Tooru never talks about his mother either, right? So the only option left is to ask the relatives of the Kokonoe family."

I sank deep into thought. But while I was thinking, Tetsurou had opened my fridge without my permission and downed a whole bottle of sake by himself. After kicking him a few times and yelling at him, I finally made my request—

To have him introduce me to the publisher of a music magazine.



I was swamped with interviews the entire week after that; and in the end, the total amount of information I had gathered was enough to fill a book. Professor Katase had agreed to allow me to use the information from the interviews for other works, so I compiled all the data and reorganized it all for an exclusive column. Since the business card of a twenty-four-year-old industry ruffian hardly held any weight, I had to have Tetsurou introduce me to an established music magazine publisher so I could investigate and gather data under the pretext of conducting interviews.

Of course Kokonoe Hirofume's parents were long gone from this world. And as for his siblings..... they were all visibly displeased when I visited them in a sharp suit; and none of them were willing to share much. Looks like Kokonoe Hirofume had indeed cut off all ties with his family.

I did receive one significant piece of information from one of his relatives though: Kokonoe Hirofume had a relative named Wakida, who was the boss of a small trading company.

"It's been a long time since I last visited the Kokonoe family, so my memory regarding quite a few things is relatively vague."

I approached him at his office, but despite my intrusion, the grizzled but energetic Mr. Wakida greeted me with a smile all the same.

"How should I put this..... that family is a really suffocating bunch! My mother is the youngest daughter of the Kokonoe family, while my father comes from a really ordinary home. It was frightening whenever we had to pay a visit to the Kokonoes. Hirofume hardly ever visited his old home, so every time our relatives gathered together, they would go all out to speak badly of him."

"Was he really hated..... that much?"

"Actually, the flak was more often directed at his wife, Rosary. The words they used were really grating to the ears. I even heard them talk about how she wasn't even human."

I was speechless. It was creepy just how racist some people could be.

"The conversations only worsened when Rosary was pregnant with Tooru. Ooku-sama had even cried for several days and nights, thinking that Tooru might be a cursed child born into the family. It felt like we were watching a period drama, really. After that, my father learned his lesson and decided to not set foot in the Kokonoe household ever again. In fact, we actually became closer to Hirofume and his wife instead." ^[3]

I gulped and swallowed my uncomfortable feelings down my throat.

"They said all that just because she was a foreigner?"

"Maybe they were harsh towards Rosary because she was ridden with illnesses? I had learned some French when I was in school, so I chatted with her quite a bit. Ever since she was a child, she had to visit the hospital quite frequently. Then, Hirofume brought her to Japan, and even sent her to a famous hospital here. She felt guilty because of things like that, so she always talked about how things would be better if she wasn't around. Well, not like you can blame her for that....."

So Madam Rosary was that troubled by so many things huh.....

A woman, all alone on foreign soil, shutting herself up in her room all the time—her only consolation was the books of her motherland.

Even though I was feeling quite depressed, questions continued to surface endlessly in my mind as I recorded the things Mr. Wakida

said.

It seemed like Kokonoe Hirofume was the one that severed ties with his family first.

If so, then Mr. Tooru's view of things didn't quite fit. Because there would've been no reason for Kokonoe Hirofume to force Madam Rosary to learn the piano to gain the approval of his family. If that is indeed true, then what was the actual reason behind that?



That night, I made an international call to Yuri in France.

"It is rare for Naomi to give me a call, but in the end, you just want to make a strange request?"

"Sorry..... but there's no one else I can turn to."

"Whatever it is, I will do it as long as it is a request from Naomi. But how are you planning to return the favor?"

"Urm..... what would you like? Hmm..... how about an article about your album in the magazine?"

"That will not be necessary. Oh, I will be heading to Japan soon."

"Eh? Really?"

"Are you happy?"

"Of course I am! It's been a while since we last met!"

"I am really happy too! The last time we got together was November last year!"

That wasn't surprising, since Yuri was a really famous violinist that was even busier than Mafuyu. Moreover, he was also French, so his activities were naturally centered around Europe. It couldn't be helped.

"Then I will stay at Naomi's home while I am in Japan. That will even things out."

"Urm, but..... my house is really tiny, you know? And I don't have any extra futons for guests either."

"Then I will just have to sleep with you! I mean, we used to do it all the time!"

We only did it once, okay!? How is that "all the time"? And we were still teenagers then! We'd definitely fall off the bed if we did that now!

In the end, I gave in to the strangely excited Yuri and agreed to let him stay at my house when he came to Japan. Whatever. It's not really a huge price to pay anyway.

I received Yuri's answer in the evening of the following day.

"Sorry, I could not find out anything. I mean, she was a patient there decades ago, and there was no way they could have given me an answer over the phone."

"I guess....."

I had asked Professor Katase for the name of the hospital Rosary Charlois had stayed at when she was in France, and had asked Yuri to check it out for me. I was originally hoping for information regarding her family or her illnesses, things like that—but it looks like it didn't work out too well.

"Right, urm....."

There was a moment of hesitation when I thought of that possibility, but I went ahead and asked anyway.

"That hospital..... isn't a hospital for mental health, right? Urm, I'm referring to the quarantine wards."

"Nope. Why do you ask?"

She had frequently visited the hospital ever since she was young, and the Kokonoe family had made her out to be some kind of freak—together, these reasons drove me think along that line even though there was no concrete reason to. Then again, if she had been placed in a quarantine ward, she probably wouldn't have met Kokonoe Hirofume.

"It is a huge hospital with quite a bit of history to its name. And it even has facilities catered to long-term patient care. I think it is a place for patients with congenital diseases."

Patients with congenital diseases. So it is indeed some sort of disease that would draw strange looks from people huh?

I hung up the phone after mumbling a muffled thanks to Yuri. But

an uncomfortable feeling remained stuck in my chest.



In order to learn more about Kokonoe Hirofume from a musical perspective, I decided to turn to Ebichiri for help in procuring more information. But the person that brought over two paper bags' worth of scores and information on Kokonoe's famous works, was someone rather unexpected.

"I am about to pick the mistress up, so I decided to come here first, as it is along the way. Additionally, I am also here to check up on Mr. Hikawa's dire financial situation, including the shabby condition of the place you are residing in."

A lady in a classy creamy-white suit stacked the huge pile of documents on my doorstep as she spoke in her usual polite and straightforward manner. It was Matsumura Hitomi, Ebichiri's secretary, as well as the butler of the Ebisawa family. It had been a while since I had last seen her. It looks like her inexplicably stern personality and her serious attitude towards work haven't changed.

"You are not planning to live together with Mistress in an apartment as tiny as this, are you? May I inquire as to what your future plans concerning the place you will be living in are?"

"Eh? Urm..... w-what?" So even you're gonna ask me about stuff like this?

"Do you not have any plans at all?"

Having a conversation like this this early in the morning will probably frighten the neighbors. And it's even taking place right at my doorstep to boot. But I don't think it'd be a good idea to invite her into the apartment either..... After giving it some thought, I still couldn't come up with an answer for her.

"Well..... since we haven't really looked that far into things....."

"I am about to freight a huge amount of Mistress's personal items from Los Angeles back to Japan, so it would save me a lot of time if you could decide on the details of the marriage and the new place where you two will be living."

Whoa! Why does it feel so real all of a sudden!?

"Urm..... I actually did mean it when I said I wasn't looking that far ahead just yet. I mean, it's exactly as you see now. I'm not even sure how I should describe my current occupation—should I call myself a session musician or a magazine critic? And my income isn't even stable yet....."

"I am not sure if you have heard this before, but would you be interested in hearing how Maestro Ebisawa proposed to Madam as a reference?"

That was completely unexpected from Miss Matsumura, so I took a step outside the door, barefoot. Ebichiri was the one who proposed? I was quite interested, but at the same time, I wasn't sure if I wanted to know more. If I'm not mistaken, Mafuyu's mother is Hungarian, and she used to be a professional pianist as well.

"Back then, despite being new on the scene with only one conducting contest victory under his belt, while conducting as a guest conductor in Hungary, Maestro proclaimed to his future wife, 'I may be conducting with a baton that wields little power right now, and therefore, may not be worthy of your hands just yet; but just wait and see—in two years' time, I will definitely become a big-shot conductor that can make even the most famous and longest-running orchestras bend to my whims willingly.'"

"Oh really....."

So Ebichiri has had his hot-blooded moments as well! Though that was still pretty cocky of him.

"The following year, when Maestro was doing a recording with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, he requested a recording of Liszt's Piano Concertos without the piano purely for personal reasons. And when he received the recordings, he gave them to Madam and said, 'You are the only one who is worthy of the solo.'"

I was speechless. The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra wasn't just a representative of the Netherlands, it was also one of the top orchestras in the world. And they had actually acceded to Ebichiri's demanding request. Then again, wait..... based on what she said earlier.....

"..... That..... That can't be how he proposed, right?"

"Yes, it is. I wonder if it is of any help to you?"

"Like hell it is!"

"Well then, please work harder so that you will become a man worthy of Mistress, Mr. Hikawa."

I was about to tear up because of that painstaking effort of hers.



I wasn't sure if it was due to Miss Matsumura's encouragement, but my workload did end up increasing. Following up on what had happened previously, Mr. Tooru ended up introducing me to more and more jobs. I was pretty thankful of him for that, but every time we finished our work, he would grab me to drink with him through the night. He was someone that never got drunk, so it was no wonder he and Kagurazaka-senpai were drinking buddies.

Thanks to Tetsurou, I was very used to handling drunkards, but Mr. Tooru was the type that wouldn't get drunk, making him that much harder for me to deal with. I thought about casually touching on Kokonoe Hirofume when he seemed to be in a great mood after a few drinks; but he punched me instead and said, "I told you not to talk about my parents ever again!" His defense was perfect.

Despite that though, I continued to pursue the subject relentlessly. What I wanted to know most were the things about his mother.

"What has my ma got to do with you? She died when I was still a little kid, so I don't remember anything."

"Was this the piece she practiced?"

I pulled a photocopy of <Fire-thieving Moths> out of my pocket and spread it out on the table. Mr. Tooru frowned as he glanced at the notes on the score.

"I can't quite remember! But it wasn't a song as shallow as this."

"Did your father play the piano together with her, or perform a duet with her with another instrument?"

"My pops was busy hitting my ma, so how would that even be possible?"

I heaved a sigh and removed my palm from the scores.

Kokonoe might've been a musician that had created plenty of works, but just like Ebichiri had said, the majority of his works were large-scale orchestra or ensemble pieces—none of them were for the piano. Given that, I had come up with the idea that the piece might've been a special song dedicated to Madam Rosary—since Kokonoe had carried the score around in his baton case all the time.

"Why are you so fixated on this? Were you offered a large amount of cash by the people at the College of Music?"

"No, it's not about the money....."

I had unwittingly become attracted to Kokonoe Hirofume, and his wife as well. What sort of people were they? What were they thinking? Why were they willing to marry someone outside their country? I didn't know the answer to any of those questions. All I knew was that the incomplete flames of the <Fire-thieving Moths> sonata were still blazing.

Yes, it was that song. That inexplicable song that had attracted my attention. And not just me, but Ebichiri, Professor Katase and even Mafuyu as well. We couldn't pry our eyes away precisely because it was in an incomplete state.

Because I was deep in thought, I hadn't noticed that Mr. Tooru's hands had stopped as he was flipping through the scores. It took me a long time to even realize that he had already put out the cigarette in his left hand.

I finally snapped back to my senses when I heard the sound of paper being crushed into a ball.

"Mr. Tooru? Wha—"

Beneath the scores were the interview reports I had collected and organized. Each time he flipped a page over, Mr. Tooru would shoot a fierce glance at the scribbles written down on the page—then, would crush the page into a ball and throw it to the floor.

It just so happened that the reports he had discovered were the ones covering what Kokonoe Hirofume's cousin, Mr. Wakida, had said. The woman's not human, a cursed child is about to be born—I had written down exactly what Mr. Wakida had said. Shit, what the heck am I doing!?

"Ah, urm..... That's..... well....."

Mr. Tooru tore the whole report up into two then stood up.

"What? What are you planning, investigating all the shitty details of my family? Are you trying to mock me?"

"That wasn't my intention! I'm just trying to understand what your parents were thinking....."

Mr. Tooru took a ten-thousand-yen note out of his wallet and slammed it—along with the bill—down on the table, then strode out of the bar. The staff and the rest of the customers all had their eyes fixed on me.

I slid down in my chair and stretched my weak hands out to gently pick up the score and the tattered reports. I could taste nothing of the lukewarm beer as I sat there regretting my carelessness.



During the weekend, Mafuyu was finally able to find some time to take a break, and appeared in front of my door in the afternoon.

"Why have you prepared lunch already?"

Asked Mafuyu furiously, as she held a shopping bag in her hands. The scent of beef stew, which I had started stewing the day before, was drifting from my kitchen to the door.

"Urm, because you said you were coming. So I thought it'd be great to have it ready so you could enjoy it immediately."

You could've just told me you were planning to bring some food over over the phone.

"You would have stopped me if you had known I was planning to cook!"

"Not only would I have not done that, I would've even been delighted about it instead! Well then, I'll go put the beef stew in the refrigerator."

After I said that, I gave Mafuyu control of the kitchen and watched her from behind with about twenty percent anticipation and eighty percent uneasiness. I had always thought it would be bliss to be able to watch a girl from behind as she was cooking, so I was planning to

savor the sight in silence. But I was forced to step in to stop her, as she was about to grab the sugar while preparing the potatoes.

Thirty minutes later, there were four large plates of Spanish omelettes on the table—equivalent to enough portions for eight people. Well, it's obvious Mafuyu's cooking skills are improving—at the very least, the shape of her omelettes has become closer to that of a circle now.

"It was way better..... w-when I was learning it from Hitomi!"

So Miss Matsumura had actually played a pretty active role behind the scenes! It seemed she had succumbed to the willful whims of her mistress, and had given Mafuyu a crash-course lesson on the dish in just a single night.

"Urm..... so that means..... you only prepared a single dish, right?"

Mafuyu's face turned red as she shook her hands repeatedly; and I ended up taking the stew out again to reheat it. While Mafuyu and I were standing side by side in the kitchen, I snuck a glance at the side of her face.

She's not angry about what had happened recently, is she?

Actually, no, I didn't make her angry—or rather, I hadn't intended to.

I hadn't revealed my thoughts about marriage to Mafuyu yet; and there was no way she was going to be the one to initiate the talk.

But I have no idea what I'm supposed to be feeling when I propose, and have no clue what marriage is even all about. What were Ebichiri and Tetsurou thinking when they proposed? What sort of promises were they planning to make? What was it like for Kokonoe Hirofume as well?

The marriage proposals of all three of them were just mind-bogglingly weird—perhaps I shouldn't be referencing proposals done by people in the musical world? While thinking that, I sent the omelette into my mouth and nearly jumped out of my seat. The inside of the omelette was completely burnt, so the onions and garlic tasted bitter as a result.

"S-Stop! Eat this instead, Naomi!"

Mafuyu pushed the plate containing the omelettes she had fried last towards me.

Marriage. Marriage huh..... Will things like this happen every night after we're married? I was really worried. And even though Mafuyu shouldn't have noticed my uneasiness, the dining table was still shrouded by silence and a burnt smell. I had originally wanted to ask Mafuyu what the reason behind her sudden desire to cook was, but then, I recalled the words she had said some time ago:

"Is my presence a bother to Naomi? Is it because there is nothing we can share between us?"

There's no need for her to worry about things like that! Why does she need to find a reason to be together with me? Across from me, Mafuyu was mashing the burnt omelette with her spoon. She then looked at me with a hesitant look—and after a while, finally reluctantly spoke.



"Urm..... I....."

"Hmm?"

"I know I am in no position to make any demands..... seeing as how, because of how busy I am with work, we have little time to see each other. But....."

Mafuyu's head lowered bit by bit as she said that, until her words faded into a murmur, causing only a faint ripple on the surface of the beef stew.

Though I had no idea what Mafuyu was saying—

I can more or less understand her feelings. She's feeling incredibly uneasy. But why? I'm standing right beside her aren't I? It's not like I'll disappear and leave her all of a sudden!



The next day, Ebichiri called me early in the morning. Confirming the caller on the screen with my droopy eyes, I thought to myself, "This guy relentlessly checks up on Mafuyu every time she stays the night at my house. I gotta hand it to him and say, 'It must be tough on you.'" Still, I picked up the call anyway. Mafuyu was already wide awake and was practicing on the electric piano with a pair of headphones on. Ebichiri's hapless voice then came through.

"Professor Katase contacted me earlier. I was told that Professor Kokonoe's house will be demolished today. Did you know about this?"

"Eh!? What!?" I rolled off the bed. Mafuyu turned her head around and removed her headphones.

"The musical instruments that the College of Music had loaned to Professor Kokonoe were stored inside his house, but all of them were sent back to the school yesterday. Professor Katase was surprised, so he contacted Tooru. That was when he heard about the demolition work."

"Just the musical instruments? What about the scores and the other documents?"

"None of them were sent to the school. They will be destroyed with the demolition. Professor Katase tried stopping Tooru, but Tooru told him off and refused to cooperate. Did you never hear him mention this?"

"Nope, never."

My drowsiness vanished in a flash; and Mafuyu was looking at me worryingly.

"I'll try asking Mr. Tooru. Mmm, okay."

I immediately dialed Mr. Tooru's number after ending the call, but no one picked up. Where on earth did he go? No wait, since the demolition is today, he might be overseeing the operation at the scene.

In any case, I've got to haul myself down to Kokonoe Hirofume's house right now. I was about to rush out of my apartment after a quick wash-up, but when I was at the door, something tugged my belt from behind.

"I am coming along as well," said Mafuyu.

"What for?"

"Because I took a day off just to be together with Naomi, but..... if you are not around....."

"Urm..... You have no idea where I'm headed, do you?"

"I am still coming regardless."

I stared at the ceiling and heaved a sigh. Tons of questions were streaking through my mind: how should I explain Mafuyu to Mr. Tooru if he's at the scene? What can Mafuyu do even if she's there with me? Will she slap me if I refuse? But then again, the insistent Mafuyu did look especially stunning.

"..... You're not planning to head outdoors in your pajamas, are you?"

"Ah! I will..... I will prepare myself right away!"

As I walked outside the apartment and waited for Mafuyu at the door, I recalled something Kagurazaka-senpai had once said.

"This is the fatal difference between the sexes, a destiny that has been carved deep into our chromosomes." There was only one real example that I was aware of.

The amount of time a girl required to prepare herself was much longer than anything a guy could imagine.



After we boarded the Yamanote train, I began filling Mafuyu in on what was going on. In order to explain Mr. Tooru's sudden decision to demolish the house, I told Mafuyu about the incident that had happened with Rosary Charlois's report. Mafuyu just listened in silence with a stony expression on her face.

Is she regretting her decision to follow me? But as I was explaining everything to her, for some reason, I was really thankful she was there. I think I probably would've exploded if I had had to face the wreckage of what used to be Kokonoe Hirofume's belongings alone.

It was a fifteen-minute taxi trip after we got off the train at the Meguro station. While riding the taxi, we passed by a residential street illuminated by soft, filtered sunlight. The street was full of bungalows and two-story buildings with spacious courtyards. But all of a sudden, abrasive silhouettes of cranes and gravel trucks appeared before our eyes. Mafuyu and I quickly got out of the taxi.

"I'm sorry, wait! Please wait!"

I yelled that out while standing next to the gatepost. The workers in safety helmets turned around and looked at me in surprise.

"This is the house of Mr. Kokonoe, right?"

I pointed in the direction of the tranquil Japanese-style wooden bungalow.

"Yeah! What do you want?"

"There are lots of important documents still inside the house! Urm..... I am a friend of the owner of this house!"

"Are you talking about Kokonoe Tooru?"

"Yeah, that's right. Did he not come down here today?"

"Why would he? We're demolishing the house here under his request. And it's part of our job to clear the things inside as well."

I fished my phone out of my pocket and called Mr. Tooru once more, but my ears were sadly greeted by a ringing tone and my sweat. What kind of bullshit is this!? You're planning to bury everything under the ashes in silence? And you're happy with that?

You didn't talk to your parents much, did you? There are plenty of fragments left behind by them in this very house, aren't there? The song that can't reach you just yet is currently echoing inside this house, and yet, you're planning to destroy everything just like that? When I regained my senses, I realized I had converted my burning thoughts straight into words. The ringing tone was also long gone, and had been replaced by background noise along with a person's heavy breaths.

I stopped talking and switched the phone to my left hand.

"..... You're freaking noisy. What do you think you're doing, yelling into the phone like that?"

Mr. Tooru spoke bluntly, but I could detect a trace of wavering in his voice.

"I'm in Meguro right now."

My voice was becoming increasingly agitated, but I tried my best to stop my voice from breaking.

"Please stop the demolition work right now! The house is still....."

"There's nothing left inside the house! All that's left in there is trash. I've already returned the instruments back to the College of Music, and I didn't see anything in there related to those scores you were talking about. Pops always burned all his draft notes after he was done with his compositions anyway."

"But that doesn't mean you can destroy everything just like that! There might be something valuable still hidden inside....."

"There isn't anything! I'm only interested in Pops' works, and he has long released all the pieces he was satisfied with. Whatever's left in the house is nothing more than just scraps."

"There's still one! The sonata that I showed you before, the one that you have no memory of!"

"Who cares!"

And the call ended just like that. A pang of sorrow almost severed my wrists, then surged its way into my heart.

Suddenly, I heard a rough shout in my other ear.

"—Hey! Miss! What do you think you're doing?"

As I was turning my head around, Mafuyu was stopped by two workers after she had dashed through the gates and into the courtyard. She was trying to make her way towards the bungalow.

"Please! Let me in! There is a very important score inside!"

I squeezed myself through the gates and sprinted towards Mafuyu. Why are you being so reckless—but that thought of mine disappeared in a flash when I saw the side of her face. What the hell am I doing, still trying to be calm and collected? Now's the time to force our way through, isn't it?

"Please! I..... I am a journalist for a music magazine!"

I forced my name card into the workers' hands.

"Did you guys know? A composer used to live in this house. And there are still lots of unreleased, precious scores in there—it would be a huge loss if we couldn't retrieve them! So please, spare us some time to look for those scores!"

"It's not like we can do anything about that....." "Yeah....."

The two workers exchanged looks with a disturbed expression on their face. The few other guys started gathering around as well.

"Who on earth are you people?" "How can we possibly allow you to go in just like that?" "This is Mr. Kokonoe's house, you know....."

"I explained everything earlier.....! We just want to look for a score, honest! So please!"

"Please! We have to find it at all costs!"

Upon seeing Mafuyu close to tears, the guys around us were beginning to show signs of hesitation. I myself couldn't believe what I was seeing. Why is Mafuyu exerting herself to this extent to help me?

"Hey, you guys, that girl has appeared on TV before, hasn't she?" "Ah, yeah! That pianist?" "So she's that girl?"

A few whispers began to surface. I was incredibly grateful for Mafuyu's fame.

"Are the things you're looking for really in this house?"

The oldest, who seemed to be the foreman of the group, frowned

as he asked that question. I couldn't answer him right away. Staring at my toes, I decided to tell him the truth.

"..... Actually..... we're not sure. But if we don't try....."

"We have lots of work to do as well. It's not like we have spare time to waste!"

"But....."

As I lifted my head, Mafuyu silently stepped forward and stood in front of me. Without saying a word, she just stared at the tanned face of the foreman.

And the first to break eye contact..... was the foreman.

"You've got thirty minutes."

My heart almost leapt out my mouth when I heard him mutter that.

"Give it up if you can't find anything!"



The corridor facing the courtyard was filled with dust, and the windows of the corridor were open, making me to wonder how long it had been since the house had been vacated. The courtyard was filled with weeds, and the rocks along the sides of the walls were stained with dried moss.

Mafuyu and I entered the house through one of the doors on the side and began searching. I wasn't sure if the house had been stripped of its contents, or if there just weren't many things around to begin with. Either way, there was nothing left in the kitchen or living room.

As we pulled open the door deep in the left area of the main wing, we were greeted by bookshelves that covered the four walls of the room, and by a carved wooden arabesque box that had been placed on the carpet. A bottle of ink was sitting on the stand, but the tip of the pen that was in the bottle had already hardened because the ink had dried up. As we circled the room, we realized the wooden box was actually a reed organ, and it actually looked pretty old. Mr. Tooru, you're actually planning to destroy an instrument as precious as this? But now's not the time to be thinking about the organ.

The smell of aged paper drifted towards me as I opened the bookshelves. The spines were all in French, German or Italian, so I pulled some books out to examine what was inside—they were scores by Debussy, Ravel and Franck. Moving onto the shelves below, I found works by Telemann and Buxtehude. All of them were scores that were readily available commercially. Even as the stacks of scores began accumulating on the wooden floor, I still wasn't able to find any handwritten staff papers or other related items. Have they all really been discarded already? But that song—that particular song—should still exist somewhere here. Because it wasn't a piece he had composed for mass release. It must be around here somewhere. I quickly flipped through each and every set of scores in an attempt to locate anything in-between the pages, but I only succeeded in stirring up dust as the loosened pages fluttered to the floor. I then moved on to another bookshelf. There was nothing in the new shelf other than the scores that were neatly stacked inside; and all it took was one look to confirm that there were no memos or sticky notes stuck in-between the pages. Despite that though, I took the scores out anyway and roughly flipped through the pages all the same. Is it really just wrong speculation on my part? Can it really be that that's just a rough work and not a completed fugue? The multitude of words encased within the phrases, the unique piano notation—were they all just wishful conjectures by us? What about the counter-melody, dancing around the main theme like a group of illusory moths fluttering around a serene bonfire. Was the boisterous scene of the oceans of the night we saw nothing more than an illusion?

Suddenly—

I heard the sounds of a piano.

I dropped the scores in my hand and lifted my head. I could feel the deep whispers come into contact with my nose as they closed in and left. It's definitely the sound of a piano. I'm definitely hearing right.

Oh right, where's Mafuyu? She's not with me in this room?

It was only then that I started searching for Mafuyu, though my response was pretty damn late. Moving towards the gushing source of the piano notes, I rushed out of the study room and passed the

dusty corridor. I then pushed aside quite a few windows made of frosted glass and burst through the stinging, stale air.

The low corridor brought me to an isolated building. For some reason, that door was the only western-style door in the house, and on it, was a semicircle scuttle that spread outwards. The gentle yet stubborn bass of the piano was flowing out from that slightly opened door, and it felt like my warmth and my heartbeat had been sucked away by sounds as deep as the oceans, causing me to freeze in place.

I quietly slid my body past the door and into the room. Inside, there was a faint smell of disinfectant, and a bed next to the wall. The sun shone into the room through slits in the curtains, and a dressing table painted in white and a small bookshelf next to a cabinet filled with medicine bottles could also be seen. As I scanned the room, I also saw covers of scores, an upright piano, and the maroon-coloured hair that was swaying in front of the instrument.

And for a moment, I forgot to breathe.

Mafuyu's left hand was dancing on the keyboard, and a few sheer pieces of paper had been placed on top of the piano music rack. The sheets looked as though they had been formed by compressing the cold, misty breaths of an early winter morning. It was a two-staff score. And looking through the transparent sheets, the surface of the piano seemed like the night sky, with the four \flat notations shining like stars. That's none other than—the A \flat major chord.

But, of course, I knew that much without even needing to look at the score. I could almost see the flock of moths fluttering above the sound of the ocean waves that Mafuyu had summoned.

I tried my hardest to suppress the sound of my footsteps and approached Mafuyu as gently as I could. She stopped playing and turned around to look at me. From the looks of her eyes, it seemed like she was in a trance. It was as though her soul had left her body.

"..... So you found it."

Mafuyu nodded in reply to my gentle words.

"Did you bring the scores with you?"

I took a few pieces of folded paper out of my pocket in response

to her question.

And that was when I noticed something—despite his agitation, Mr. Tooru had only torn up the investigation reports. He hadn't destroyed the scores that had been placed on top.

Is that because, deep inside him..... he knew the scores were something of huge importance?

Mafuyu took the scores from me and laid them on top of the keyboard as I watched from behind.

"Piano four hands..... No, there's way too much overlap in the music range. So it should be a piano duet?"

Mafuyu shook her head.

"No. It is a solo."

My eyes were fixed on her beautifully shaped ears.

"How can you tell?"

"It is obvious looking at the score."

She took the photocopied scores and clipped them behind the sheets that were already on the stand. I was stunned. What Mafuyu had found were actually scores that were written on tracing paper. The treble clef lined up with the treble clef; and the bass clef overlapped with the other bass clef. The words and song were silently joined together as one.

I held my breath. The incredibly sheer tracing paper had merged the two scores together, and the A \flat major piano sonata had thus formed right in front of me amidst the night sky. Mafuyu's right, this is indeed a solo piece. It was pretty obvious looking at the elegant notes on the score, but my intuition became conviction when we reached the final page. At the end of the score, there was a word written before "ensemble."

toujours ensemble

Mafuyu and I had no idea what the phrase meant, but we knew it wasn't a musical term. If it's not a message for a musician, then it must be a personal message from Kokonoe Hirofume.

When she was done stacking the eight scores together and had briefly read through the composition, Mafuyu placed her delicate

fingers on the keyboard once more. The fluttering moths reappeared above the surface of the ocean, and it felt like I was getting sucked into the gentle and endless night again.

Why did Kokonoe Hirofume choose to split the piano sonata in two? Why didn't he grant it the freedom to soar in the broad skies instead of locking up half its wings in the room filled with memories of his wife? The reason behind that..... It almost felt like I could reach it, but it still wasn't quite within my grasp.

The things he was trying to hide, the things he was trying to protect, what he was trying to retain—

But the sounds of the piano were severed all of a sudden, and I surfaced in the ocean of the night and made my way to the shore. I found Mafuyu looking at me with a sorrowful expression in her eyes.

"W-What's wrong?"

"I cannot play..... any further."

"Why?" It felt like I was being abandoned in a dried-up coral desert all of a sudden.

"It is technically impossible to do so."

Mafuyu pressed her hands hard on the overlapping scores on the stand.

"I originally thought the lowest pitch of the scattered chords could be played with the assistance of my left hand, but right here—there's a continuous stretch of octaves. It is quite impossible to play despite my repeated attempts."

My eyes were once again fixed on the hazy trebles of the score. But located above the moths fluttering along the fringes of the flames, was a clue drawn from various memories and words.

The two that met at a hospital in a foreign land; the wife that was labeled "inhuman"; the two parts of the hidden score; the piano sonata that even Mafuyu couldn't play—the answer lurked deep in that darkness.

A squeak came from the door behind us, causing Mafuyu and I to turn our heads around at the same time. I heard a few coughs, then saw a few workers in overalls and a helmet freeze in place. They

lowered their gaze when they noticed Mafuyu's and mine.

I immediately lowered my head and apologized when I saw what time it was on my cellphone.

"We are terribly sorry, it is way past our agreed time....."

"Urm..... it's okay. You're just a few minutes late."

"You're not gonna play on?" "The song's not over yet, is it?"

Mafuyu and I exchanged looks.

It is impossible to play for now—the tiny room was filled with a regretful, but at the same time reassuring, atmosphere when Mafuyu murmured her answer apologetically.

"..... So did you guys..... find what you wanted?"

Asked the foreman in all seriousness.

Mafuyu nodded and hugged the stack of scores in her chest.

"Just those few pieces of paper? You're not gonna bring these things here away?"

The foreman walked to the bookshelf and randomly pulled out a few books. I leaned my body over in his direction in surprise. The aged and thick cover of the book was stamped with the word "Seiyoudou." It was the name of the bookstore that Kokonoe Hirofume's cousin, Wakida, had been tasked to pick up a few books from.

I took the book from the foreman and flipped through the pages. The only French I knew was limited to music terminology, so there was no way I could understand the contents inside; but I could still grasp a bit of what the book was about based on the diagrams. It seemed to cover music theory and piano playing, as well as how to play in an orchestral setting.

A French book purchased and kept by Rosary Charlois—upon looking at each and every spine found on the bookshelf, I realized all the books were related to music.

I spewed out the breath that was in my chest and returned the book back to the shelf.

"You okay with leaving them here?" whispered the foreman. "If

you're gonna leave them here, we're going to view that as you throwing them away."

I shook my head weakly.

"..... Those scores..... are more than enough."

I turned my head around and nodded at the uneasy Mafuyu.

I finally understood everything—the thoughts of Kokonoe Hirofume.



During the weekend, I managed to catch Mr. Tooru in the elevator next to the entrance of the record building. It was evening then.

"..... You again?"

Mr. Tooru was wearing a pair of high-profile orange shades, which matched well with his high nose bridge and fair skin. I almost hastily retreated at the sight of him, but just as the doors of the elevator were opening, I circled around Mr. Tooru from behind and blocked his path.

"I have no desire to see you. You're always sticking your nose in all sorts of places! It's best you disappear from my sight, you bastard, or I'll make sure you won't be able to survive in the music industry anymore!"

I gulped and shrunk back a little. But the doors of the elevator closed just then, shutting off my only path of retreat. Mr. Tooru and I were the only people in that two-square-meter-wide space.

"I'm not making any requests of you. I just want you to listen to this."

I pulled a portable recorder out of my pocket. Mr. Tooru then opened his mouth, but suddenly froze in place when he heard the piano melody that was flowing from the recorder.

It wasn't the incomplete half that I had showed him back then, but the complete A♭ major piano sonata, created by overlapping multiple recordings of Mafuyu's "mercury fingers"—[**<Sonate pour deux>**](#). The frowning Mr. Tooru tried to reach his finger out to press the button to open the doors of the unmoving elevator, but I moved my body to obstruct his hand.

"Please listen to it until the end!"

He then grabbed me by the collar instead, and slammed me into the buttons, causing the floor beneath us to rise. Mafuyu's piano began pacing into the serene development in E major, as though it were responding to the movement of the elevator. Behind those orange sunglasses, Mr. Tooru's eyes were gradually losing their warmth.

Then, the first theme of the fugue finally returned, with strings of fragmented stars above it.

And what followed after, was the part that Mafuyu could not play solo, even despite her sublime skills. As Mr. Tooru shut his eyes, I could feel the strength in his hands gradually seeping away.

The double fugue spiraled repeatedly amid the drizzling rain of the shrill vibrato. And the instant the sonata was sucked clean by the finishing chord, it felt like my hand, and the recorder in it, was about to melt and crash to the ground.

The elevator stopped at the seventh floor.

It had also probably stopped somewhere in-between, but Mr. Tooru and I had both been too spellbound by the piano sonata to notice anything.

As my strength left my knees, I leaned back into a corner of the elevator and slumped to the floor. Mr. Tooru, on the other hand, just pressed the "door open" button and stepped past me and into the hallway. I hastily picked up the ice cold recorder, hugged it in my chest and chased after him. I finally caught up to him in a stairwell devoid of people.

"You should..... remember it now, right?"

My question landed on the back of Mr. Tooru, who was standing beneath the faint green glow of the emergency exit sign.

"Remember what?"

"The song..... your mother played..... was this song, right?"

"..... So it is, but so what?"

"Please, just answer me this one time. Did your mother play this song alone?"

Mr. Tooru shot me a fierce glare through his sunglasses as he frowned and grunted. My shoulders were slammed by the unpleasant click of his tongue. He then prepared himself to descend down the stairs.

"So what? There's no way she wouldn't know how to play, seeing as how Pops forced her to."

It felt like something was jammed in my chest, causing me to respond half a step late in my pursuit of Mr. Tooru.

That's right. That's the answer—the truth hidden beneath Kokonoe Hirofume's piano sonata in A \flat major.

And I'm about to reveal that secret right now. But is this really the correct move? I wasn't too sure.

Either way, I pulled the score out of my pocket and spread it out before Mr. Tooru's eyes, blocking his path in the process. It was the complete score—the score created by overlapping the parts together.

I evaded Mr. Tooru's arm as he tried to swat me and pointed at the last page.

"Please take a look at this. There are five voices to the fugue in the coda, and the trills repeat on and on. And since the left hand is stuck playing the octaves, that means the middle ranges have to be played by the thumb, index and middle finger of the right hand. But that's impossible, because there's not enough fingers to do so."

Mr Tooru stopped in his tracks. The colors in his eyes had all but vanished at that point.

"There is only one person that can play this sonata—Rosary Charlois, your mother. I'm not sure if you know this or not—and this is purely conjecture on my part, as I have no concrete proof—but I can't think of any possibility other than this: your mother probably suffered from polydactyly."

I continued my words despite the contorted expression that arose on Mr. Tooru's face because of his confusion.

"I think there was probably an extra finger around the fourth or baby finger of her right hand. It was a congenital disorder..... though that's not quite the correct term. Since she was able to play the

piano with it, it must mean that that finger was fully developed. But the discrimination from others still persisted. The Kokonoe family was probably very insistent about insignificant details like that, so, in order to stand against their discrimination, Kokonoe Hirofume cut off all ties with his family."

"What kind of bullshit are you spewing!?"

My words were interrupted by the deep, hoarse voice of Mr. Tooru.

"If what you say is true..... then Pops really was someone..... that treated my ma like a human instrument, wasn't he? Forcing someone without any musical background to play the piano....."

"That's not it! Do you still remember who Mr. Wakida is? He's your father's cousin. He told me that Madam Rosary had purchased plenty of books on the piano and music, and had even read about orchestra music theory! There is no way she would've done things like that if she had been forced to play the piano! She must have learned the piano because she wanted to respond to her husband's music....."

"So what!?" roared Mr. Tooru, his neck red from anger. "So Pops got all complacent and deliberately wrote something that can't be played by a normal person for her? That guy's brain is only filled with music. That's why he brought my ma all the way from France to Japan! He's just human trash!"

I shoved the first page of the score right in front of Mr Tooru's eyes.

"If that's the case, then shouldn't he have released this work when he was still alive? Why would he have gone through the huge trouble of splitting the score in two to hide it, despite it being such a wonderful composition? The score for the right hand was kept in Madam Rosary's room, while the score for the left was placed in Kokonoe Hirofume's baton case, which he carried with him at all times. You should understand what that means, right? Here, look at the title."

With a force strong enough to pierce through the papers, I pointed my finger at the "Sonate pour deux" located near the title line. Professor Katase had said that it probably meant that the sonata

was a duet, but he was wrong. It was definitely a solo, and Mafuyu proved that. That was why, at that moment, I was very certain of what it meant.

"It's a sonata written for two. In other words, a sonata that exists solely for that couple."

Kokonoe Hirofume had written the piece solely for Rosary Charlois. For his dear wife, who had come to a place far away from home; who was filled with unease, not knowing if she should stay by the side of the one dearest to her.

To create a reason for her to stay by his side.

And to create a place where she belonged. Something that was meaningful only with her existence.

As for Rosary, she probably played that song for one person alone—for her husband.

Years have already gone by, and the two are no longer around. To be honest, I'm not too sure I'm doing the right thing by unearthing this song from the debris and ashes.

But if we have to find someone to accept this song, there's probably only one person that has that right.

Mr. Tooru pushed my shoulder aside and started walking towards the turn in the staircase, so I hastily shoved the bundled score into his chest. With his back facing me, Mr. Tooru removed his sunglasses; then, his footsteps gradually receded and faded into the darkness.

The only thing I could hear was the sound of my heartbeat and my painful breaths.

A sense of helplessness surged through my body, and I gripped my recorder hard in order to endure the discomfort.

Is this all just me..... poking my nose into something I shouldn't have? There was no real need to convey the fragments of truth to anyone else, as it would've only brought pain. And even if I had conveyed it to someone, it would've only meant that I had condensed all the pain into a single container.

But did I convey it successfully?

I could only hope that it had managed to move Mr. Tooru's heart, even if just a little. Not my powerless words, but the sonata that Mafuyu had summoned for my sake.

Pressing the portable recorder into my chest once more, I reaffirmed my feelings again, then opened the door of the stairwell. The bells of the elevator; the chatters and footsteps of the commuters—as I was surrounded by the sounds of reality once more, the prickling sounds of life awakened a sense of nostalgia within me.



That night, I made a call to Mafuyu. When I said the words "I'd love to see you tonight," I was greeted by a bunch of strange noises coming from her side. It sounds like she knocked into something, or perhaps that was the dissonance of her piano? But why is she so surprised anyway?

"W-Why?"

"Why are you asking..... why?"—I came close to asking her that, but decided to reflect on it a little instead. Come to think of it, I do rarely say things like that to Mafuyu. It has always been her coming over to my house whenever she could find the time.

"I wish to see you right now. Urm..... are you at a rehearsal? Tomorrow's the start of your solo tour, right?"

"Mmm..... it is. P-Please hold on! I will ask my manager!"

"Ah—It's okay. If you're really tight on time....."

"I will definitely find time!"

I suddenly heard a flurry of footsteps, followed by Mafuyu conversing with someone else. So..... she actually didn't hang up the phone? Oh well, whatever.

It seemed like she had barely managed to squeeze out some time for me, so I made my way to the music hall to meet Mafuyu.

"What is..... with you today?"

Mafuyu, who was sitting by herself in front of a majestic grand piano in the middle of the soundproof practice room, seemed a little

fidgety. She was rehearsing in her actual dress for the performance (something the easily nervous Mafuyu did commonly). The pale pink dress, with its neckline right down at her shoulders, made Mafuyu look especially cute. But that just made me feel even more remorseful than ever. To think she was that surprised by just me wanting to meet her. Sorry for being a man that doesn't usually show his affection.

"It's nothing really..... Urm, just something minor....."

I had no idea how to get the ball rolling, so I ended up talking about things related to Kokonoe Hirofume's piano sonata. There was a brief moment when Mafuyu had put on a really disappointed and obvious "so you came all the way here just to tell me this?" expression on her face; but in the end, she was quite interested in the developments as well, and had even asked a few questions of her own.

"So the piano sonata will not be included in Kokonoe Hirofume's documentary?"

"Mmm, Professor Katase specifically told me it won't."

Because it was a song that belonged only to the Kokonoe couple. And, additionally, in the heat of the moment, I had actually handed the handwritten scores by Kokonoe Hirofume to Mr. Tooru without consulting anyone else. So thank goodness Professor Katase was understanding regarding that matter.

"So you do not have the scores anymore? I cannot memorize a song after just playing it once. I had originally planned to play the whole song by just skipping a few notes....."

Mafuyu pouted. Looks like she's really in love with that song. Well, so am I.

"Don't worry, I copied it beforehand! The reason I came here today was so that I could pass it on to you!"

I gave the score, together with the clear folder, to Mafuyu. Despite her murmuring something like "Just for this?" she went back to her seat all the same and opened the score. Prior to handing the sheets over to Mr. Tooru, I had already scanned a copy of the entire song. And the score that I had just passed to Mafuyu was created by

skipping and rearranging a few notes in the original.

"I worked really hard to rearrange this. I may be an incompetent composer, but simple things like this aren't too difficult for me."

Mafuyu spent a few minutes reading through the score carefully. She then heaved a sigh to soothe her nervousness, and lifted both her hands. Her fingers began dancing on the black and white keys.

Even though only a few notes had been changed, the way Mafuyu was playing the song was completely different from when she had played the multiple recordings for the version I had shown Mr. Tooru. It was as though she were counting each and every ripple on the surface of the ocean, allowing the moths to rest on her fingertips before she sent them off to greater heights.

This is not a song that exists for me, or for Mafuyu. But the only thing I want to do right now is immerse myself in the music.

The flock of fluttering, shining moths had finally reached the end of the story, disappearing without a trace in an instant. Then, there was those two words that I had copied straight from the original, overlapped score:

"toujours ensemble"

"So..... what exactly do these two words mean?" asked Mafuyu, as she lifted her head to look at me.

"Mmm, it's actually not a musical term. You see....."

Mafuyu's eyes widened when she saw what I took out of my pocket. It was a platinum ring with a calm shimmer, and the words "toujours ensemble" were carved on the inner side of the ring.

"It's a phrase commonly used during proposals. There are lots of different styles of carved rings, so it took me quite some time to decide on one!"

Mafuyu's sapphire eyes were wavering between my face and the ring. Her eyes were getting wetter and wetter, and her lips were trembling. I held her right hand in order to share her trembles as well. For a painfully long period of time, we were only communicating with each other through our eyes. Finally, Mafuyu timidly lifted her ring finger ever so slightly.

I could feel a blazing pulse when I slotted the ring onto her finger.



"Urm..... well....."

I couldn't even speak properly. My chest was burning all the way up to my neck.

"Actually..... my real reason for meeting you today was to give you this. I did my homework, and it seems like Europeans wear their wedding ring on their right hand. So, since Mafuyu is half-Hungarian, it should be this hand all right. And then....."

"H-How do you know the size of my finger?"

Why is she asking something so insignificant at a time like this? Is it because of the mess of emotions she's experiencing right now? Then again, why am I calmly thinking about such things at a time like this!?

"I secretly measured it when you were asleep. I wanted it to be a surprise."

"D-Dummy!"

Mafuyu was about to lower her head once more, so I bent down and pressed my forehead against hers.

"Sorry for making you worry about so many things. I will..... urm..... do my best..... not to make you feel uneasy ever again."

So..... please marry me.

My proposal landed on the back of Mafuyu's hands. And what followed, were drops of tears.

Mafuyu..... is crying?

I was planning to look up at her, but Mafuyu turned her face away instead.

"Sorry..... urm..... did I shock you?"

"..... I am fine."

"But..... w-why are you crying then.....?"

"You idiot!"

Mafuyu stood up. Her tears fell on my face.

"I am crying because I am happy! Why can you not even understand something as simple as that!?"

"Ah..... S-Sorry."

I tried to stand back up with the help of the music stand, but ended up scattering the scores all over the floor instead.

"Whoa! I'm sorry....."

I picked up the scores in a frenzy, but Mafuyu tapped me lightly on my shoulder.

"It is okay! Just get out for a moment, and do not come back until I say you can!"

"Eh? W-Why?"

Mafuyu kept pushing me from behind until I was at the door of the practice room.

"B-Because..... my face is a mess right now! My eyes are swollen, and my makeup is all messed up, so..... Just get out for now!"

Despite her saying that though, Mafuyu hugged my shoulders just as I was about to open the door, and pressed her warm, wet cheek tightly against my back.

Her murmurs didn't reach my ears. Instead, they were conveyed straight to my heart.

Once I was in the corridor, I shut the door of the room and immersed myself in the heat being emitted by my earlobes, my neck and my fingertips. How much of this is coming from my own body, and how much of this warmth is from Mafuyu? I couldn't tell. Shit, I can't stop my heart from thumping wildly. If there were a microphone and a bass around here, I would probably revert back to when I was sixteen and would start yelling away all the heat I am currently experiencing.

But I am twenty-four now. It may be late, but I have gradually come to grasp many important things. And what I have learned today is this—

Our tears are the most beautiful when we are happy.

I opened up the score of the piano sonata in A ♭ major, which had been in my hands all this while, and flipped to the last page. I then gently caressed the final phrase written in the song.

"toujours ensemble"—together forever.

Those were the words Kokonoe Hirofume had gifted Rosary

Charlois when she left the hospital and crossed the ocean to arrive in a foreign country far away from home.

It is natural to feel uneasy when you are in foreign place where the only person you know is your lover. That fear resides deep in everyone's heart.

That's why we make an oath.

Swearing to be together, swearing to become the place where the other can live.

The revolutionary of love had once said this: "*You can't carve your feelings into other people's hearts with just words alone.*" That was why we needed to make a powerful oath. Now I finally understand—the reason Kokonoe Hirofume had created that piano sonata; and the reason Ebichiri had given that baffling recording to Mafuyu's mother. And I think I even understand now why Tetsurou had borrowed that huge amount of cash from Misako as well.

It was all so that they could convey this message deep in the hearts of their loved ones: you are essential to me.

There were plenty of ways that one could go about doing that. Composers and conductors, for example, could seal the promise with a powerful imprint called music. But it wasn't the gift that was important, or how deeply one had thought about what to give. As long as one conveyed the message of "staying together forever"; and as long as one could decisively come up with a promise that would eliminate all traces of loneliness and uneasiness—that would be more than enough. That was why I had resorted to an ancient practice, to allow my blood to speak in my stead. To bind her heart, as well as the finger that it was linked to, with a ring formed with my words, conveying my promise to Mafuyu.

I felt a vibration from the cellphone in my pocket. It was a message from Yuri.

"I will be in Tokyo tomorrow." I see..... so we'll get to see each other tomorrow! It was incredibly tempting to break the news about me and Mafuyu to him right at that moment, but I thought it'd be way more interesting to do it in front of him when we met.

I noticed two other messages as well. One was from Mr. Tooru,

which I opened right away in fright. But I was surprised when I saw the huge list of dates, the names of the studios and artists, the details of the recordings, and all sorts of other necessary preparations. So that means..... he's entrusting these jobs to me?

And written at the end of the cold and emotionless list was actually, "What's the point of giving me just the scores? Pass me the recording as well!" I couldn't hold back my snicker.

Lastly, I opened the final message, which read, "I'm hungry and penniless right now. Can I look for Nao right now?"—I could only pull my hair in a dumbfounded state in response.

Then again.....

That may be the sort of person he is, but he is still my father. And he has been so for the last twenty-four years, ever since I was born, and will continue to be, for as long as I live. I do think it is something pretty stupid though, and should just be taken for granted; but regardless of how boring it is, even if I were to do things the right and conservative way, it's not like we can just sever our relationship.

So I guess he should probably be the first person I should break the news to, right?

After I dialed his number, he picked up on the second ring.

"Hey, is that you, Tetsurou?"

"Nao? Ah..... I forgot when I'm supposed to receive the next payment for my articles, and I gambled away all my cash on horse racing, so I'll pretty much be penniless until next week! So please cook dinner for me....."

I temporarily held the cellphone about thirty centimeters away from my ears, and waited until Tetsurou was tired of chattering before I spoke.

"Urm..... There's something I have to tell you....."

I wonder what the expression on his face will be? I can't wait.

"We're getting married."

Notes

1. wiki on Nippon Budokan [here](#)
2. From wikipedia, a part refers to the separate printed or manuscript copies of the music for each individual instrument in an ensemble or orchestra
3. Ooku information on wiki [here](#).

If There's No Name on the Wing

Stereophonic Love

The Final Interview

Nobody Sleeps Tonight

"We're getting married."

It was late at night when Naomi called. At the time, I was digging through piles of records in hopes of stumbling upon some cash or something edible.

"Really..... Hmm? That's not important..... I thought I remembered dumping some instant ramen here?"

"What do you mean 'not important'!?"

My head crashed into the desk when I tried to dodge that ear-piercing roar from the phone, causing the records stacked on the desk to tumble down on me like debris from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

"Tetsurou? What was that noise? What happened? You okay?"

"Ugh, I'm fine. Furtwängler's portrait is now crooked..... How am I supposed to tell what's right-side up now? Oh right, so when's the wedding dinner?"

"Eh? Urm..... well..... not that soon."

"If only you were holding the wedding dinner right after this..... I'm really hungry, you know? How about a full course French dinner?"

"I'm an idiot for letting you be the first person to know....."

"Ah, hold on, my bad!"

I pushed through the layer of record covers and finally crawled out of the room, then switched the cellphone to my other hand.

"And so? Who's getting married?"

"You mind listening to me seriously for once!? I am!"

"Eeeeehhhhhhhhhhhhhh?"

I missed my step on the stairs and, in response, swung my limbs about in a fluster. As my body flipped around in the air, I managed to grab the banister, then planted my butt on the rail and slid my way down to the first floor. Pretty impressive acrobatics, if I do say so

myself. But I still ended up crashing headfirst into the corner of the wall. That freaking hurts.

"Eh? Urm..... Do you have any idea what you're talking about, Lil' Nao? We're talking about marriage here, yeah? Where you can naturally get a girl pregnant just by being together?"

"Like that's ever gonna happen! Why are you trying to teach false things about sex to your son that's already twenty-four years old?"

"But in Lil' Nao's case, you just appeared in this world without me knowing what had happened....."

"What~!?!?"

"Ahaha, just kiddin'! You're the culmination of love between Misako and I!"

"That doesn't sound any better! Ahh, whatever, do as you please."

I rubbed my head and sat down on the first step of the staircase.

"You're talking about marriage, but who are you wedding?"

"Who else? Who else could it be but Mafuyu?"

"Oh, plenty! Like Chiaki or Kagurazaka Kyouko?"

"Nah, that's impossible."

"How about that blonde violinist?"

"Yuri's a guy, damn it!"

"You blurted his name right out away even though I didn't say it. Now that's just suspicious, don't you think?"

Duuuu The call was disconnected. It was just a joke. As always, his boiling point is too low.

I stood up and brushed the dust off my T-shirt, then walked past the orange lights and into the living room, to pull a record off the rack in the dark. It was probably a habit born from my job, but I always selected music that would allow me to show off my professional knowledge whenever the situation called for it.

"Marriage huh..... I forgot when he said this, but I do remember him talking about how marriage was unnecessary or something, right? He's matured over time"—I thought to myself.

But it doesn't feel real at all.

I mean, he is someone that has been taking care of himself (and even me as well) ever since he was young. I'm not sure, but maybe that's why I thought he wasn't someone that would have the same "urges" you would expect of a child. I even expected him to live out his entire life single.

After all, he would never be getting married if it hadn't been for that one moment of impulse!

Now, what should I listen to on a night like this? Opera? <The Marriage of Figaro> seems like overkill, since it discusses who has the right to get laid on the wedding night; and I'd feel sorry for Nao for that..... <Lucia di Lammermoor>..... That's about political marriages.....

I ended up choosing <Turandot>. The princess that slaughtered her suitors, and the prince from an unknown land that was in love with the princess—it was a story about an impulsive marriage. So that makes Ebichiri Emperor Altoum? Pwahaha, there is no way he would agree to the marriage.

Eh? Wait..... so that means, Ebichiri and I..... are about to become in-laws?

Gotta call him right away.

"What time do you think it is right now?"

Ebichiri didn't sound very happy.

"Mmm..... I have some questions for you. Can you hear the song I'm listening to?"

"<Turandot>..... The duet between Princess Turandot and Calàf, right? What about it? It is already midnight!"

"Right, right. So I was suddenly struck with a question: after the princess and the prince wed, what becomes of the relationship between their fathers? Specifically speaking, Emperor Altoum and King Timur?"

"Quit beating around the bush if you are talking about Mafuyu and Naomi's marriage."

"Whoa." I nearly dropped the phone on the floor. "W-What? So you

already knew?"

"I more or less poked around regarding their views on the matter, and I did ask Mafuyu if she had the intention to marry. I never got a clear answer from her, but since she will be shifting the focus of her job back to Japan—"

"Ah, so I'm a step ahead of you regarding the news! Yay~ I win! Nao called me just now to tell me they'd be getting married!"

"Really? He reached his decision pretty fast this time around."

I sank myself deep into the sofa and lowered my voice.

"You know..... can you be just a little bit more..... surprised or something? I made this call just so I could enjoy your flustered reaction!"

"It is not like I exist in this world just to make you happy."

"What!? Haven't you been my plaything this whole time?"

Ebichiri ignored my words without hesitation.

"Not only is Naomi indecisive, he is also strangely lacking in confidence. Moreover, his future is not too bright, so I am not too assured by him....."

"Oh geez, I wonder just who his parents are? Eh..... That's me!"

Ebichiri had no intention of playing along with me, so I was forced to go along with my own joke. And thinking about it—doing things like this in the living room in the middle of the night amidst the glamorous orchestra of Puccini..... feels really freaking empty.

"But aside from those issues, Naomi is a pretty dependable person. Mafuyu is not like a typical person—there are lots of things she does not know how to do..... but Naomi happens to be great at housework. In a way, I think Mafuyu has found the right partner for herself."

"Because Nao's practically my wife! Ah, you gotta listen to this, Ebichiri. It's been years since Nao has moved out of the house, but I only learned how to change the toilet rolls just recently! How's that!?"

"I have a rehearsal tomorrow morning, so I will be hanging up."

"Can't I get a response or two from you!? I'm feeling really lonely

right now!"

"Get somebody else to accompany you if you cannot fall asleep!"

I realized something all of a sudden, so I lifted my legs onto the sofa and curled myself up while hugging my knees. Here goes my final question.

"..... Question. Could it be that..... I am the only one that's getting all flustered?"

"Took you long enough."

And with that, the call was disconnected. I left my arms dangling behind the sofa and leaned my head against the back. While staring at the dark ceiling, I spaced out to the resounding **tenor of Mario Del Monaco**.

Princess Turandot wasn't prepared for marriage even after the prince had solved her difficult questions, so the princess, at her wits' end, ended up crying in front of her father. But, for some unknown reason, the prince couldn't watch on any longer and said: I will give up on the princess if you find out what my name is before dawn.

And so, the princess ordered—

Nobody sleeps tonight—everyone is to investigate the man's name throughout the night!

It's not like I could fall asleep even without the order of the princess! To think my son actually said he's getting married.....

Speaking of which, Nao really hates operas, doesn't he? He doesn't like any of the Italian operas.

"Why did the prince say that?"—Nao disliked that part the most —"He could have married her successfully if he had kept his mouth shut! And he even revealed his name in the end. Is he an idiot?"

A really frank opinion, but the opinion of a child.

By now, he should understand how the prince had felt, right? He probably does.

The prince had done it to make the princess feel at ease—that was all there was to it. And it was the same for marriage as well.

The problem is, scenes with the two fathers in <Turandot> are

really sparse, so I can't use them as reference at all! I have no idea what I should be doing right now. Oh right, I haven't even congratulated him yet. Do I have to? How should I go about doing it?

Guess I'll call Nao again.

"..... Yeah? What?"

"Ah, sorry, are you busy making babies with Mafuyu? Sorry about that....."

"What kind of joke is that!? I'm hanging up!"

Yet, I could hear the voice of a girl saying "Naomi, what is wrong with you? You are not sleeping yet?" behind the furious roars of my son. Looks like I wasn't too far off.

"Well, I need to ask you something. When a son tells his father he is about to marry a woman..... Urm, how should the father feel..... And, what should he say to his son? I don't know what to do!"

"Aren't I your son!? Why the heck are you asking the person in question!?"

Damn my son! Oh well, given this wonderful opportunity, I should ask Nao to put Ebisawa Mafuyu on the phone.

"I'm about to be a grandpa now! Rather than waiting until I pay an official visit to her in the future, it'd be better if I said a few words to her first over the phone..... You gotta be quick about things like this!"

Nao hesitated for quite a while, but eventually gave in.

"..... Hello? Good evening..... It has been a while....."

"Long time no see! It's me, Tetsurou, the ruffian of the industry! Let's get straight to the point, you mind granting me the rights to promote your next Japan tour?" "Stop soliciting!" "Nao, do not interrupt us!" "M-May I ask..... if you are about to discuss work-related matters with me?"

"Nah, I was just kidding."

Upon hearing the fine voice of Ebisawa Mafuyu, I cleared my throat, lowered my own voice, and dropped my body back down on the sofa. How did Nao hear what I just said? Ah, are they lying down side by side, their faces snuggled against each other with only a

cellphone in-between them? Damn it! What a lovey-dovey couple!

Then again, that's how all couples will behave right before they get married, regardless of how they will fare in the future.....

"How should I put it..... Are you really okay with this? You only have one chance at life, so are you really gonna choose Nao?"

"..... I will always choose Nao..... regardless of the number of chances I am offered."

How I wish there was someone that would say that to me as well!

"I see..... H-Hmm. I-In any case..... congratulations? Mmm, it should be okay for me to say that at a time like this, right? Oh yeah, what're your plans for the wedding? Nao's side is easy to deal with, but Mafuyu should have a large network of people you can't ignore, so you'll have to hold a wedding dinner, right?"

"..... We have not..... thought that far ahead just yet. It may be necessary for us to hold a wedding dinner, but..... I am thinking of whether Naomi and I should make a trip to Germany before that..... We were just discussing that."

"Germany?" I rolled my eyes as I sifted through my memories.
"..... Ah, your mother?"

Ebisawa Mafuyu's mother. I think she started living in Bonn, Germany after divorcing from Ebichiri.

"Mmm. If possible..... I hope Papa..... will come with us too....."

"That's not quite possible, is it?"

I then teased Mafuyu by mentioning things like the number of grandchildren I would love to have, which resulted in Nao snatching the phone from her and roaring at me in anger. He then hung up without warning again.

I slumped down into the sofa. Right, it's high time Ebichiri faces his past, yeah? Well, it should be difficult for him to reject Mafuyu's request, since she will be going there to break the news of her marriage to her mother. Why did the couple break up in the first place? A clash in their musical ideologies.....? Can't be, right? It's not like disbanding a band or something. I'm not too certain about the details, but I'm pretty sure the wife was the one that couldn't

deal with the husband any longer. Speaking of which, I—

I suddenly sprang up from the sofa.

Now's not the time to be laughing at them! I'm in the exact same position right now!

I hopped off the sofa and circled around the dining table. Nao gets along really well with Misako, so there's no doubt he will invite her if they're holding a wedding dinner. I might actually be the one that's not invited..... Mmm, but then I don't have to worry about bumping into her if that happens. Like hell that'll happen! I'm his father after all! Nao's not that heartless!

What to do? Misako and I chat on the phone once every few months, but it's been years since we last met! Though I do get to see her close-up photos in the news or on the internet every once in a while, she's way prettier in person..... Ah, that's not the point, is it?

In any case, we'll meet each other sooner or later. What to do? You can hang up a call at any time, so you don't really have to worry about the bullshit you're saying, but an actual meetup is a totally different league altogether! She won't insult my shabby clothes like she used to first thing when we meet again, right? Or will she complain about my table manners? As for my work..... she is not someone that would talk much about that. She is respectful when it comes to things like that.

How long have we been apart?

Back when Nao was just six, till now—that's no more than twenty years. So eighteen?

More than enough time for a brat to grow up into an adult.

Actually, this is a pretty good chance for me, isn't it? It's been quite a while, and although it's not like I have to make up with Misako or anything..... I'm just running away from my problems using my jokes as a smokescreen. So now's the time to calm down and face the issue head on, isn't it?

Despite knowing that, it still took me the entire length of the opera before I could resolve myself.

What one needs at a time like this, is guts. It's kind of similar to

how udon becomes all soggy if you overcook it—so I called Misako's company right away. My call was picked up by a secretary despite it being the middle of the night. Now that's what you'd expect of an international company.

"Sure, I'll get the chairman for you. Please hang up the phone and wait for her call."

Eh? Hold on, you just have to pass the message on in my stead! Is she still awake at a time like this?

My phone rang after a short wait. When I picked up the call, I heard some background noise, followed by—

A nostalgic voice.

"..... Mmm, it's me, Tetsurou. Sorry for calling you in the middle of the night. Eh? You're in Tel Aviv right now? Where on earth is that? The Middle East? Ah, right, it should be evening there. Mmm, I forgot about the time difference already..... It's nothing important, just, urm..... well..... let's get married....."

She hung up.

At times like this, you just need the guts to call her once more. So I did just that and called her company to have the secretary put me through to her again.

"Sorry, I'm not sure if that was a slip of the tongue or just one of my jokes..... Mmm..... Well..... I guess he'll inform you about it sooner or later, but Nao's about to get married..... Yeah, mmm, that piano girl. So you knew about Mafuyu? Oh right, you and Nao do meet up quite frequently..... Yeah, yeah! She's a really cute girl! Well, Nao inherited his taste in girls from me! Mmm..... Also, will you be attending the wedding dinner if they're holding one? I think so, they'll probably reserve a table for us..... the table of honor, yeah? Ah, not yet, they haven't decided on the details like dates and whatnot..... Oh but..... you know, stuff like that happens all the time. Like how the guy and girl at the same table end up marrying each other after participating in someone else's wedding dinner together....." She hung up on me again.

At times like this, you just need the guts to talk to her again and again. So I called the company for the third time. I'm terribly sorry,

Miss Secretary. As for Misako, she did politely return both my calls—so I guess she's still holding a torch for me? But, of course, that's something I'll keep to myself.

"I said I'm sorry already! I'll be serious this time. So..... when will you return to Japan?"

Misako's voice finally returned to normal. It was the first time we had talked to each other seriously in a long while.

"Nao and Mafuyu will definitely pay you a visit. And since Ebichiri's a really stubborn person, he'll definitely insist on troublesome things like how 'the parents from both families should meet up,' and things like that. We skipped all that stuff back then, didn't we? Mmm, ...*sigh*... In any case, we'll have our hands full pretty soon, so why don't we meet up before that?"

I honestly wanted to praise myself. It was really smooth; and I wasn't buttering her up. None of my cheeky words. And no shyness from me either. There, I said it just fine, didn't I!?

"Just a dinner or something. There's plenty of stuff we can talk about..... Ah, I'm not too sure if that's the case for you, but I have so many things I want to tell you!"

What happened in the past, and what will happen in the future..... as well as tiny, insignificant things that aren't related to the profound questions of life.....

I switched my phone to the other ear, lay down on the carpet, and waited for Misako's answer.

All I had to do was shut my trap and wait for her response while listening to the soft, mist-like background noise. But damn my personality. My serious facade didn't last more than two minutes, and I ended up saying,

"..... This feels just like..... how it was back when I proposed to you, doesn't it?"

What came through the phone after that was a ground-shaking roar of anger.

But Misako didn't hang up this time around. Though silence dawned between us once more, we were still connected to each other—though the Gobi desert, the Taklamakan desert or the Syrian desert

did keep us apart.

I'll wait no matter how long it takes, even if it means waiting until dawn. She's the one paying for the international call anyway, and I've already made her wait eighteen long years. All we had to do was think deeply about our past to obtain our answer.

I walked to the sound system and replayed the aria of Prince Calàf—and along with it, came Misako's faint, soft voice.

As for what the song was saying—

*On your mouth I will tell it when the light shines.
And my kiss will dissolve the silence that makes you mine!*

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